

A Peter Parker Problem

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A Peter Parker Problem

by [spagbol99](#)

Summary

Peter Parker was back from the dead. At least that is what everybody told him. He'd been snapped out of existence until some sort of time travel and an active death wish by his mentor had saved him and the universe. Just your average sort of life for a 16 year old from Queens.

Peter comes back to find May has a husband and a kid. A new family he has to fit into. But he has done it before, he can do it again.

The only thing that feels solid is Tony: the Blip and fatherhood have mellowed him and Peter loves the bond they have now. He knows Tony would be there for him through anything. But Tony needs to focus on his own recovery - not small time Peter Parker problems. When things at home take a turn for the worse, Peter decides that he'll handle it himself. He is Spider-man. He's been to space and fought aliens. He can get through anything. After all, if May is happy, he is happy, right? Right?

Notes

So, I spent the first half of lockdown discovering and devouring MCU fan fiction and the second half writing my own one.

This started out as my wanting to give my own spin on the "May's Abusive Partner" trope and ended up almost 150K words...oops!

It is complete and I will be posting 2/3 times a week depending on what the people want.

It is my first time writing Fan fiction so feedback would be appreciated.

I think I have tagged enough warnings but just to be clear - TW: for physical abuse in later chapters.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Chapter 1

Peter

Don't die, don't die, don't die.

The words beat a rhythm through Peter's mind as he sat on the cool, tile floor of the hospital corridor. No one else was here right now but he could hear all the sounds in the surrounding rooms – people moving around with urgency, machines beeping, the low murmur of voices.

The rest of the Avengers who came through the portal with him had been ushered away by a – frankly *scary*- Doctor, who was not intimidated by a group of battle-weary superheroes. He didn't dare go in himself, but parking himself in the corridor meant he could at least listen in to what was happening inside.

Don't die, don't die, don't die.

Peter let out a breath, trying to force his own heart rate lower. He closed his eyes as he focussed-cutting through the sounds of the machines, the panicked heartbeats of Pepper and Rhodey, and zoned in on Tony's familiar heartbeat. The one he'd gotten used to hearing during lab sessions and visits to the Compound; almost two years of hearing it had solidified its rhythm in his mind. Peter knew how it sounded when Tony was concentrating on a project, when they watched movies on the sofa, the sharp upturn of it when he was angry at Peter's recklessness – (*'you have the self-preservation instincts of a gnat, Parker'*). Tony's heartbeat wasn't sounding quite like it normally did today – then again, after what had just happened, his own didn't feel all that steady right now.

Peter felt bile burning the back of his throat as he thought about the battle: Tony's heart had stopped. He'd *heard* it stop. The loudest silence he had ever heard. There was barely time to let the tears run down his face when there was a shout and then Thor's lightning struck Tony and his heart suddenly kicked in again. Peter had thought he might pass out with relief. Thor had given Tony a second chance. It was more that Uncle Ben had ever gotten – they'd never even made it to the hospital.

Don't die, don't die, don't die.

Peter felt his breath start to shorten - no, thinking about Uncle Ben right now was not a good idea. Thinking about losing someone else...yeah, no, don't go there. Tony's heart was beating now, that was all that mattered, if Tony could just be OK, *everything* would be OK. Right?

He rested his head against the wall, continuing to ignore the sharp pain in his back that was trying to make itself known. He couldn't relax whilst the sounds from next door were still so frantic-heightened heartbeats and stifled sobs making his head spin.

There was a sudden change in the rhythm of Tony's heart and then...nothing. He ran to the door of the medical room, almost pushing it open in spite of the scary Doctor but pressed his ear against the glass instead. He heard the whirring noise of a defibrillator charging up and he flinched as he heard the sound of the electric shock being sent through Tony's body.

Nothing.

Whirr, Thump-Thump.

Whirr, Thump-Thump.

He half-sobbed when he heard the heart beat again, slow but steady, before slumping down on the floor of the corridor like someone had flicked his off switch.

“Queens.”

Peter looked up at the voice and saw Captain America above him, holding out a bottle of water.

“Thanks.” Peter took it and watched as the great man slid down next to him on the floor, taking a drink from his own bottle. Peter copied him, suddenly draining the whole thing when his body seemingly realised just how parched it was. He took a sideways glance at the hero next to him, his helmet off now and sweaty, blond hair plastered against his head. Peter noted the cuts on his face had been treated; some patched with steri-strips.

They sat there for a few minutes – Captain America casually sat next to him, quietly sipping on a bottle of water like that was a normal occurrence- Peter not sure if this was an awkward silence that he was meant to break, but honestly too tense to care.

“How are you doing son?”

His voice was warm but had a weary edge to it. It wasn't the forced jovial tone Peter was used to hearing from the school mandated PSA's.

“I-I'm fine Captain America, sir.” Peter briefly met the blue eyes that looked down at him.

The older man smiled warmly at him. “The name is Steve Rogers. What about you?”

“I'm Peter, Mr Rogers, Peter Parker.” He guessed there was little point in hiding his true identity now – his mask was off – and well, he was an Avenger now too. At least that was what Mr Stark had said back on the donut ship.

“Nice to meet you without you putting me on my ass.” Steve side-smiled at him and Peter felt his face heat up.

“Um, I, I'm...” Peter flustered.

Steve put a hand up. “It's fine kid. All water under the bridge.”

“Or, in our case, a jet bridge.” The words popped out; apparently he had no filter right now.

Steve let out a short burst of laughter. “Yeah, you're right.” He laid his head back against the wall with a small smile. “Christ, that was a long time ago.”

Was it? Only two years ago...but then he remembered what Dr Strange had said – that he'd been gone for five years. That...that would take some time to wrap his head around.

“If you say so...” He plastered on a smile that he hoped covered up his current, complete and total, existential crisis.

“So, where are the others?” Peter asked, hoping to divert away from any conversations about all that.

“They’re just getting patched up next door.”

“Are they OK?” Peter sat up a bit. He’d been so focused on Mr Stark’s wellbeing that he hadn’t stopped to consider if everyone else was alright.

“Nothing life threatening. Mostly superficial injuries except for Banner’s arm. He was the one who...” Steve clicked his fingers. “...to get you all back in the first place.”

Peter gulped. Oh yeah, of course, someone had to bring them back from the *dead* before they could fight. Did that make him a Zombie? Had he just been part of a Zombie army?

Peter must have looked freaked out as the older guy’s eyes softened.

“Look, let’s get you checked out too, OK?” He nodded his head in the direction of the other room.

Peter tensed. He didn’t want to leave Mr Stark. In case he...he didn’t want to finish that thought.

“I’m fine Mr Rogers,” Peter clasped his hands around his drawn-up knees, “I want to stay nearby.”

Steve didn’t say anything but was quiet for a moment. “I think he’s stable now.”

Peter listened in, making out the familiar heartbeat straight away. It was then that he zoned in on the other heartbeats in the room – the one he thought was the senior Doctor’s was steady, as were Pepper and Rhodey’s – all much slower than they had been five minutes before.

“Yeah,” he let out a breath, “it sounds like it.”

“Enhanced hearing?” Steve clarified.

Peter nodded. “Enhanced all senses really.”

Steve looked impressed: like he wasn’t a jacked hundred-year-old super soldier. “Come on then, let’s get you sorted. I don’t think Tony will be happy with me if he wakes up and you’re still bleeding.”

Peter still didn’t want to but didn’t want to be difficult with one of his heroes. As he followed the man, he tried not to think about the fact Steve had said *if* Mr Stark wakes up, not *when*.

The room he was led into was full of medical bays, a few curtains part way closed with voices coming from them. Peter could hear more voices from an adjacent room. A lady dressed in scrubs came towards them both.

“Would you mind giving him the once over, Doctor?” Steve said politely, but all business.

“Of course,” replied the Doctor, her voice with an accent Peter couldn’t place.

The Doctor started inspecting Peter’s bruised face, but he gently pulled away.

“I’m fine.” Peter’s eyes caught Mr Rogers, who was giving him a look. He relented. Mr Stark got pretty pissed if he played down injuries. “There is some pain in my back.”

The Doctor went behind him and pulled down the ripped suit. Peter craned his head.

“Oh crap, my suit is ruined. Mr Stark is gonna kill me.”

Steve started to smile but then a voice came from the door.

“Stevie.”

They both saw the Winter Soldier at the same time; Steve pulling in a breath sharply as he did. Peter watched as Steve crossed the distance in a few short strides and encased the other man in a massive hug. Peter could feel the emotion between them from here and he tried not to listen as

they talked. But that was almost impossible in this room with someone with his senses.

Steve's voice flowed with free emotion. "I thought I'd lost you forever this time."

The Winter Soldier's voice was gruffer, but not without feeling. "Seems like I'm a hard man to put down permanently."

There was a little chuckle-sob between them, and another hug and Peter felt his cheeks heat at his intrusion into their very personal moment. So, the Winter Soldier had been dusted as well- it must be so hard to be without your best friend for 5 years. He couldn't imagine being without Ned. Ned! What had happened to Ned? And oh my God, Aunt May. Had she been gone too? Was she OK?

A sharp pain in his back stopped his spiralling thoughts and made him hiss. He arched away from it.

"I'm sorry," the Doctor said from behind, "there's a nasty cut here that will need stitches."

Peter watched as the Doctor went and gathered what she needed. She pulled a small table on wheels and secured it in front of him, before going to get some more supplies.

"Peter, this is James Buchanan Barnes." Steve was in front of him smiling, his eyes tinged red. Peter saw that Mr Barnes' eyes were too.

The soldier stuck out his hand and Peter shook it. "Mr Barnes, nice to see you, um,...again."

The soldier's eyes narrowed slightly, and he gave a short nod.

Any further conversation was halted by the return of the Doctor. She had a large needle and Peter raised his hand in a stop motion. "What is that for?"

"Anaesthetic to numb the area and another shot for pain relief. You are allergic to something?"

“No, it just won’t work.” Peter hesitated, not really wanting to give this stranger detail about how his powers worked. “I just burn through it.”

“It really needs to be done, even if you heal fast, as I imagine you do?” Peter nodded slightly. “Even then, it’s still bleeding too much now.”

“Y-you can just do it without anything.” Peter had had to stitch himself up a few times in the early days and he hadn’t had any fancy painkillers then.

A discomforted look travelled over the Doctor’s features, but she just nodded.

“I’m starting to think we have more than a few things in common, Queens.” Steve nudged him with his shoulder.

Something in common with Captain America? Peter felt his cheeks start to heat. “I-I don’t know about that, sir.”

“Yeah Stevie, no one can be as much of a punk as you...”

“Jerk.”

Steve knocked his shoulder into Mr Barnes who returned him a shove. It was funny to see them goof around and it raised the first genuine smile from him.

“Lean onto the table please.” The Doctor instructed him. “Try to stay as still as possible.”

Super-healing or not, he felt everything and the needle going into the skin was no exception. He held his breath as she made the first incision, gripping the edges of the table in front of him.

The second time, she must have snagged something as it caused a burst of pain and he gripped the table harder. This time the flimsy metal started to bend and crack with the force of his grip.

The Doctor stopped. “I really need you to stay still.”

There was a clunk as Mr Barnes' metal elbow hit the table. He crouched down and offered his hand out. Peter hesitated.

"It's Vibranium," he said, cool blue eyes meeting his, "you can't break it."

The Doctor started again, and Peter grasped his cool metal hand quickly. He breathed heavily, bearing down on the Winter Soldier's hand when the pain spiked.

The Doctor finished and Peter unclasped Mr Barnes hand. "Thank you," he said, wiping a line of sweat off his forehead. His back throbbed but it was nothing like the sharp pain of the stitches.

"You got heart, Kid." Steve squeezed his shoulder briefly. Ned was going to freak when Peter told him.

"Any news, Steve?" Peter looked up from his seat on the bed to see a large, green man. His arm was strapped up and Peter realised that it was Hulk, but not the one he was used to seeing on TV. He seemed very much calm and in control and as he walked over closer, Peter could see worry in his eyes.

"No, but his heart is beating on its own right now, which is an improvement." Steve replied. He seemed to notice Peter staring at Bruce.

"Have you met Dr Bruce Banner, or wait, do you prefer Professor Hulk now?"

The green man laughed. "That's just something that they call me now I've combined my brains and brawn. But Bruce is just fine."

Peter tried not to stare at this walking, talking embodiment of how much had changed in five years. His level of hero worship though had certainly not.

"Oh my God, Dr Banner, it's an honour, sir. I read all of your papers on the effects of Gamma radiation and your work with portable water filtration systems for third world countries."

God Peter, try to rein some of your nerd in right now.

Dr Banner looked surprised but smiled broadly. “You must be Peter – Tony told me about you.”

A warm feeling surged into Peter’s stomach. “He did?”

“Sure.”

They were interrupted then by the arrival of Rhodey. Peter jumped off the bed, his stomach clenched, and he crossed his fingers that there be no bad news.

Rhodey looked tired and tense but as he spoke his gaze softened a little.

“They think they’ve managed to stabilise his heart. Whatever Shuri gave him to combat the radiation seems to have been mostly successful. Strange has been monitoring his brain function and it looks promising. They’re going to keep him in a coma though to see how he reacts. Then they will try surgery to take the gauntlet off – it looks like the nano tech fused to his skin – and then see if they can save his arm. Bruce, can you get in contact with Dr Cho? We are going to need her regeneration expertise.”

Bruce nodded and headed off in a different direction.

“Steve, could you contact Happy? Pepper wants him and Morgan here.”

Steve nodded and Mr Barnes trailed after him, as he went to find a phone. Peter didn’t know who Morgan was but no doubt a lot had gone on that he wasn’t aware of.

Rhodey saw Peter then and he came over, his eyes lit up. “It’s good to have you back.” He patted him on the shoulder. They’d met a few times at the Compound; Peter liked his easy-going nature and the way he and Tony bounced off of each other – Rhodey a calming presence to Mr Stark’s frenetic energy.

“It doesn’t feel like I ever went away,” Peter said.

Rhodey nodded. "I can imagine."

"Um, Mr Rhodes, would it be ok for me to borrow someone's phone...?"

Rhodey's eyebrows jumped. "Of course! You want to call your Aunt, right?"

"Yeah, do you know if she...?"

"No, she didn't snap." Rhodey seemed confident of that and Peter wasn't sure if that was a good thing. She would have spent the last five years thinking he was dead. She would have lost the last of her family and been alone.

Peter's throat felt tight as he followed Rhodey into the other room. Bruce and Steve were talking on phones at opposite ends of the large room. There were some couches on the other side of the room and on them sat Thor, Falcon and Scarlet Witch. Like that was totally normal. They looked over at him and he smiled nervously, putting a hand up in a lame 'hello'. He heard Falcon's voice say quietly, "Shit, Spider-man is just a kid." He wanted to say '*actually I'm 16*', but didn't have the chance before Rhodey turned and handed him a phone.

"Here you go, I have some official calls to make myself. I'll check in with you later."

Peter thanked him and then, gripping the phone, he slipped back out into the medical room he'd just been in. He sat back on the bed before dialling the only phone number that he had ever memorised.

The phone rang once and then an automated voice cut in. "*This number is no longer in service.*"

Peter frowned. She'd always had that number, since, like, forever. He didn't know what else to do. He didn't like to bother Rhodey with this, as he had enough on his mind. He felt tiredness setting into his bones. Normally the chance to be around his lifelong heroes would have been his dream, but right now he didn't have it in him to have any more introductions and small talk.

He made his way back to the corridor and slid back into his spot on the floor. He leant his head back against the wall and searched for the only sound that would give him any comfort. He found

it and let his eyes close as he listened to the steady rhythm of Tony's heart.

"Peter, Peter wake up." It didn't sound like May: but it was gentle and familiar. He opened his eyes to see Pepper leaning over him.

He jumped up. "What's going on? Is he OK?"

"No change, still stable." Pepper smiled; her eyes weary, dark shadows beneath them. "Have you been out here all night?"

Peter had no idea what time it was. "I'm not sure, Miss Potts," he said, working a crick out of his neck with his hand.

"King T'Challa organised some rooms for the others to get some rest. I could find someone to take you." Pepper's brow wrinkled as she looked around the corridor.

"I'm honestly OK. I'd rather stay nearby." Peter pushed his hair out of his face.

Pepper gave him a sympathetic smile. "Would you like to come in and see him?"

He wanted to see Tony, but he was scared. The last time he'd seen him, he had taken his last breath. He hadn't ever wanted to be in that position again after watching it with Ben, but he had. He wasn't sure he could watch it a third time.

Pepper seemed to notice his hesitancy and squeezed his arm. He followed her into the bright, white room. She went directly over to the bed and slipped into the chair next to him, but Peter stopped near the door. The beep of the machines was even louder now, and Tony lay with wires coming out of what seemed like everywhere. Peter could see from here that the right side of his face was charred, and branch-like marks trailed down his neck, chest and arm before it stopped where his arm became the gauntlet. *Lichtenberg figures* – his mind supplied that information out of nowhere.

The rainbow colours of the Stones stood out on his hand. The rest of the suit had been removed and his body covered with a sheet; dark blue and purple marks littering his chest where it poked out from the top. Peter folded his arms around himself and swallowed a shaky breath. He didn't look like Tony, he looked like a shell. What if he never recovered?

“He's not in any pain and his heart is stable. They're keeping him in the coma to help him recover. Once Dr Cho gets here they will do surgery to take off the gauntlet and then try to regenerate his cells to heal his arm.”

Peter nodded. That was good. Well, as good as the situation could be.

“You can come closer and sit with him, if you like.” Pepper said, patting the chair next to her.

Peter started to edge forwards, but a no-nonsense looking nurse came over.

“I'm sorry but we need to be wary of infection. You are filthy.” Her stern look made him take a half step back.

Peter looked down – he was still in his suit and she was not wrong – he was covered in the muck and sweat of the battlefield.

Pepper frowned. “I didn't think of that. Why don't you use the shower in the bathroom – there are scrubs in there to change into.” She pointed to the door at one end of the room.

Once inside, he started to pull off the Iron Spider suit and it released itself, turning into a small pocket- sized square. Wow – he hadn't really had the chance to fanboy about the nanotech suit he now had. He then realised that he still had his usual suit on underneath. Huh. Oh yeah, Tony had saved him when he was falling off the donut ship thingy. He pulled it off and could see how badly he'd ripped the back. Shit. The nano suit was incredible but this one was the first one Mr Stark had ever made for him and he felt sentimentally attached to it.

The shower was amazing and soothed out the sore muscles and bruises from the fight - *yesterday?* - or whenever it was. He felt a bit sore in places, but a look in the mirror showed he was mostly healed: ghosts of bruises on his face. The stitches on his back had done the job and he couldn't feel much pain there anymore.

He dried off and slipped the scrubs on, grabbing his suits before opening up the door. As he stepped back into the room, there was a small shriek.

“Peter!” A little girl with dark, brown hair jumped off of Pepper’s lap and ran at him, full pelt.

“Morgan, wait...” he heard Pepper say just as she collided with his leg, causing him to drop the suits.

He instinctively reached out and patted her on the head even though he had no clue who she was.

Pepper made it over to him with an apologetic smile. “Peter, this is our daughter, Morgan.”

What? A shiver of shock went through his body and he looked back down at the little person grasping his leg. She looked up at him with familiar brown eyes.

“Your daughter? And Tony’s?”

“That tends to be how these things work.” Peter looked up to see these words were spoken by Happy.

“Happy!” He exclaimed before being pulled into an unexpected bear hug by the man. He was surprised; Happy always seemed to begrudgingly put up with him.

Happy pulled away, his eyes glassy as he clapped him on the shoulder. “Glad to have you back kid.”

Peter felt his chest tighten at the emotion. It was reassuring to speak to someone he knew well.

“Morgan, let Peter go now.” Pepper’s voice was soft, and the little girl seemed to hold on to him tighter.

He got down to her level and looked at her face to face.

“Hey, nice to meet you Morgan.” He held out his hand and she laughed and shook it up and down and he pretended to fall over from the strength of it. He was rewarded with a giggle and her trying to pull him up again. He let himself be pulled up and she kept her hand in his.

Just then, the doors opened, and two Doctors came in.

“Miss Potts, Dr Cho is all set up and ready in our surgical unit. We just need to prep Mr Stark.”

Peter watched a wave of worry wash over her.

“Happy, can you take Morgan...somewhere else?”

He nodded but as he reached for her, she dipped behind Peter’s leg.

“Let’s go together, yeah?” Peter asked her, and after grabbing his suit in the other hand, she let herself be led by him.

“Thanks Peter,” Pepper said with a weary smile.

Peter followed Happy out of the corridor and all the way out to a courtyard that sat in-between buildings. There was a water feature and Morgan let go of his hand to go and look at it.

Happy must have seen him watching her as he said; “She is really something, hey?”

Peter nodded looking at this physical evidence of how much had changed since he had been gone.

“She is. How old is she?”

“Four now. But she can seem older, she’s a bright spark. Takes mostly after her mother, thank god.”

Peter looked up to share a wide smile with Happy. He remembered the suit in his hands.

“Oh man, Happy, look, my suit got shredded,” he held it up, poking a finger through to show the gaping hole through the material, “Mr Stark is going to kill me.”

Happy let out a short bark. “I think he might let it pass this one time. Why don’t you let me sort that out for you?”

He took it off Peter before giving a laugh again, his eyes lingering on Peter, and then squeezing him on the shoulder. They both watched Morgan for a moment as she ran around the fountain in circles.

“Um, Happy, I-I tried to ring Aunt May, but it said that number is no longer in service. Do you... do you know if she is... OK?”

Happy paled then but started searching in his suit pocket.

“Oh God, you haven’t spoken to her yet?” He pulled his phone out and started tapping on it. “Crap, I have a missed call from her. Yes, she is OK, last I heard. She didn’t snap. I have her number here.”

Peter felt a trickle of electricity run through him. He didn’t know relief could feel so visceral.

Peter took the phone from Happy and walked to a corner of the courtyard. He didn’t know what to expect – to him he’d just seen her a few days ago. Yes, he’d been on a spaceship – on Titan, the pain of disintegrating and the horror on Mr Stark’s face – and then in another battle since then, a lot had happened, but he hadn’t felt the passage of time. He hadn’t felt ‘gone’. Still, tears were in his eyes as he pressed the call button on the phone.

“Happy?” It was her voice; just the same as it’d always been.

Tears rushed forward. “May?” was all he could get out.

“Peter? Peter. Oh my God, is that you?”

“Yes, it’s me, Aunt May.”

“Are you OK? Oh my God, I can’t believe it’s you, you’re alive.’ She was weeping now and so was he. He crouched down leaning his head against the cool wall. “Where are you?”

“I - I think I’m in Wakanda,” he said, as that had been his assumption.

“What?!”

“Mr Stark, he died, but then they brought him back. He saved us all, but he’s in a bad way. He is going into surgery now. I don’t know if he will make it.” His throat tightened again.

“Oh sweetheart, that’s awful. I hope it goes well.” He could hear her wiping her nose. “When can you get back to New York?”

“I-I don’t know.” Peter stuttered. He wanted to see her desperately, but he also didn’t want to leave without knowing if Tony would be OK. “It’s hectic here so I might need to stay for a bit. But I’ll make sure I call you. I tried to call yesterday but your number was disconnected. Happy arrived today and he gave me this one.”

“Oh, thank God, I knew I shouldn’t have got a new phone plan, but Kevin convinced me. Something in me said not to, but you were gone; we held a memorial....” She started to cry again. Peter could make out a deeper, questioning voice in the background.

Aunt May’s voice muffled on the line a bit, but he heard her say; “It’s Peter, Kevin, Peter’s alive.”

“Who is Kevin?” Peter asked.

“Oh sweetie,” May’s voice softened, “there is so much to tell you. I don’t want to overwhelm you but I-I got remarried – Kevin is my husband. We have a son, Alfie, who is almost 4.”

Peter took in a breath. She what? The idea of Aunt May moving on after Ben felt weird in itself, but to have a kid too. He didn't think she'd ever wanted kids. This all felt like it had happened in such a short time and he had to remind himself that it had been five years.

Her voice, tinged with anxiety, stopped his free-falling thoughts, "Peter, are you still there?"

"Yes," his voice was so thick that he coughed but it did nothing to help, "yes I am. Wow, that's wonderful. I'm so happy for you."

"I can't wait for you to meet them. I've told them all about you over the years. I think Alfie knows every story about your childhood by heart." He could hear her tears starting again. "I can't believe this is happening. I love you so much Peter. I know how much you care about Tony, just, get back home to me as soon as you can."

"I will, Aunt May. I love you too. I'll be home soon." He didn't stop the tears this time: letting them drip onto the light blue scrubs. *Home*. A new husband and a kid. That wasn't the home that he'd been thinking of. Suddenly getting back to Aunt May didn't feel as easy as it had before.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Thank you for all the encouraging comments from the first chapter- there is such a lovely community on here.

Can't wait to hear what you all think of this chapter ;)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tony

The clouds didn't move in the way that he thought they usually did. They seemed to be going backwards, like time was reversing. Had they always done that, and he never realised? He was still surrounded by the warm feeling – like he was on a beach in Bali again; soaking up rays and gin in equal measure. This was better than before when he had been icy cold and scared – there had been darkness and pain and – wait – he couldn't remember any more than that. The warm was too encompassing to let him fully remember. Now here is that voice again – *Pepper* – he liked it when the voices came. He heard them all; Pepper, Morgan, Happy, Rhodey, Cap, Bruce, Thor, Wanda, Sam, and the Kid, probably more. He couldn't quite hold on to what they said but he heard them say his name, could swear he felt them touch him, but then they would be gone.

This time Pepper's voice was more persistent. It sounded like it was becoming louder. Louder and clearer. He pushed towards the sound – the warm retreating a little to let him get closer. He heard her say his name a few times. *Tony. Tony. Wake up.*

Wake up? So, he was asleep – is that what he'd been doing?

Tony – if you can hear me, open your eyes.

My eyes. Open them. Right, I can do that. Tony pushed but nothing happened. He pushed again and was rewarded with a sliver of light.

“Yes, yes sweetheart. Can you open them more?”

He pushed again and opened them, the light flooding in and he blinked furiously as his eyes adjusted. Once they had, he found the source of the voice. Pepper smiling so hard at him that he thought she might crack open her face.

“Tony.” He felt her hand on his face which caused him to sigh.

“Pep,” he breathed out and tears spilled out of her eyes.

He felt a squeeze on his hand, but he struggled to be able to squeeze back more than a tiny bit.

“Do you remember what happened?” She asked.

Tony searched his mind. Thanos. The Battle. He got the Stones and snapped his fingers.

“I remember...the Kid was talking to me – said we won - and then you...you told me to rest now.”

She let out a little cry and more tears slid down her cheeks. “Since when did you ever listen to me.” She pulled his hand up to her lips and kissed it.

He closed his eyes for a second. He was so tired. His body felt so heavy. He forced them open again.

“Morgan?” He asked, feeling the effort of it.

“She’s just outside in the hallway – do you want to see her?”

He nodded gently. She turned her head and said something to someone that he didn’t hear.

A moment later he saw her – his Morgan – in the arms of Peter. *Peter*. Morgan looked unsure of him and Peter’s eyes were red.

“Morguna,” He tried to reach his hand to her and with effort he lifted it a little. OK, maybe it was just one finger.

“Daddy.” She looked unsure, but Peter leant her down so she could touch his hand. As soon as he felt her touch, tears came to his eyes.

“I love you 3000, Morgs.”

“Daddy, that’s my number!” She clambered from Peter to Pepper, crossing her arms around her mother’s neck, still looking fearful of him.

Tony focused his eyes back on Peter; stood there with his fingers wrapped so tightly around his arms that it was like he was trying to literally hold himself together. “Hey Kid.”

“Hey Mr Stark,” Peter’s eyes were full of tears now.

Tony smiled at the Kid’s use of his full name, even after everything. He wiggled a finger and Peter took his hand instantly. Tony gripped it: it was there, real, full of flesh and not fading beneath his fingertips.

“Thank you for bringing me back – well, *everyone*, back. For saving us all. You really did it.” The kid’s words were hurried and although there were tears on his cheeks, he smiled so brightly.

Tony felt warmth rushing him again.

“I-I’m really tired.” He felt his eyes closing and he couldn’t stop them.

“That’s OK,” he heard Pepper say, her fingers in his hair. “you sleep; we have all the time in the world to talk.”

The next few times he woke up were similar. He was able to talk for a few minutes before the tiredness overwhelmed him. The doctors reassured him this was normal – that they would be reducing his pain medication as much as they could to enable him to be more lucid.

The Avengers came through a few more times and he saw more tear-filled eyes than he ever thought that he would. A few of them might have actually been sad to see him go after all. He'd ascertained that he'd died on the field and been brought back by Thor's lightening and the quick thinking of the Wakandan medical team. Dr Cho had been enlisted to help save his arm which had been annihilated by the power of the Stones. Luckily her Cradle tech had worked and had been slowly building up his arm. He tried not to look at it – they mostly kept it covered which can only mean that they thought he might freak out if he saw it. Which only made him imagine hunks of charred flesh. If it all went to shit, he could design a kick ass prosthetic to give Barnes a run for his money – but on the days when he felt more positive, his hope was high that Cho would come through.

The nanites on his suit and whatever Wakandan miracle cure Shuri had given him straight away had mostly absorbed the Gamma from the output, but he figured he wouldn't be having any more babies, and who knew what the long-term implications would be. He'd worry about that later – he was just pleased about the fact that his brain had begun to think about these things – that had to be a sign that he was getting stronger. The physical limitations were starting to get frustrating. The injured arm was kept numbed at all times and the rest of his body felt like a limp noodle. While he could move everything and his reflexes were in order, it was exhausting. He had a long road of rehab ahead of him.

Giggling lulled him from his snooze today. As he opened his eyes, he could see the late afternoon sunlight peeking through the blinds.

He looked over to where the noise was coming from. There on the sofa in one corner of the room sat Peter, with Morgan curled up on his lap, one of her books in his hand. Peter had been a fixture since he woke up, and when he was tired and couldn't talk anymore, he'd just watch him-reassuring himself that he was really here. He drank him in now; Peter brushing Morgan's hair gently off her face so she could see the pictures in the book. It sent a warm feeling through him, seeing them together. Peter was really good with her and she was besotted. He should probably have toned down his bedtime stories of *'The Adventures of Peter Parker and Spider-man.'*

He watched now as Morgan looked up at Peter; eyes wide. "Please Peter," he heard her whine gently.

Uh oh, the Kid was done for now. He watched Peter looking a little unsure but then whispered

'Okay' with a smile.

He watched as Peter put her down and then climbed up the wall, so he was hanging upside down with his crazy Spidey stickiness. She held her arms up to him and he held on to her and swung her gently from side to side as she giggled. Tony's heart filled again, then it started to still as he watched Peter turn her upside down as well, her hair falling around her laughing face.

He coughed loudly on purpose and Peter's head shot to look at him. He raised an eyebrow and Peter quickly, but carefully, put Morgan down, before unsticking himself; shoving his hands in his pockets as if they were the ones causing trouble all of their own accord. Tony knew Peter wouldn't drop Morgan – superpowers notwithstanding – he could tell that Peter cared for Morgan already and wouldn't do anything that might harm her.

“Daddy!” Morgan whined. “You're no fun!” Morgan came and climbed up onto the bed next to him: her warm body pushing into his.

“Sorry Mr Stark,” Peter had come closer, his eyes dodging to the ground.

Tony didn't mean to make him feel bad, really. “Hey, I know how hard it is to resist those baby browns.”

Peter half-smiled and nodded. “It's her superpower, Mr Stark.”

Pepper and Happy came in together then; Happy tapping on the Starkpad in his hand.

“Right, well, I think that's everything. You'll let me know if you remember anything else?” Happy said and Pepper nodded. “You ready, Peter?”

Tony watched as the Kid's shoulders slumped. He'd expected him to be more excited to go home. Tony felt a similar mix of feelings about it – he wanted him to reunite with his Aunt, but he'd be lying if he said he wanted to see him go. Five years without him had been hard. They'd built a strong relationship despite his turning down the Avengers role. It had been an astute decision by the teen. It had given him time to grow into his powers and they had bonded over working on tech. He'd felt the Kid's loss more than anyone else's.

He watched as Peter gave Pepper a hug and Morgan jumped down and wrapped herself around his

legs.

“Why can’t Peter stay?” Morgan had already been told that Peter was going to have to leave today, but she rarely liked to take no for an answer. They were going to be screwed when she became a teenager.

Pepper was about to speak, but Peter leant down and whispered something to Morgan. She smiled and gave him another hug. He picked her up and handed her to Pepper, who took her over to the corner as she began to sniffle.

“You said goodbye to the rest of the team?”

Peter smiled widely. By the time Tony had started to come out of his funk, the Kid had already wormed his way into the hearts of the team. The Kid’s hero worship had been as expected, but it had eased something within Tony seeing how much the team had taken to him. Peter’s hair never stayed unruffled for more than 5 minutes when they were around. You could see how much Peter loved being around them all. He hadn’t had that before the Snap when the Accords and everything that followed had broken up the band before Peter had even been part of the fold. Sure, he’d had Tony and Rhodey and the occasional visit with Vision, but it wasn’t the same.

“Yeah, I saw them this morning. Sam and Bucky tried to convince me to smuggle a goat back to New York for them?!” His brown eyes crinkled in an amused frown. “Luckily Cap intervened before I had to turn them down.”

Tony snorted. “Sounds about right. I think Sam will secretly be relieved you’re going. I’m not sure his ego can take you beating him at Poker yet again.”

Peter shrugged his shoulders. “It was literally for peanuts.”

“Hey, a win’s a win kid, don’t sell yourself short.” Tony’s mouth twitched as another joke came to him.

Peter held a finger up to him. “Don’t follow that with a short joke now, Mr Stark. Or I’ll tell Shuri that you agreed she was probably smarter than you.”

“Yeah, I said *probably*. Besides, I can’t be held responsible for anything I say while I’m on all

these drugs.”

Peter smirked in response at him.

Happy gave the most unsubtle throat clearing from his position by the door.

Tony rolled his eyes hard enough he hoped Happy could see, before tracking his eyes back to the Kid. The lightness was gone from Peter and Tony could see the tension in his body, his hand wrapping around the metal bar at the end of the bed.

“Take care of yourself, Mr Stark.” Peter’s voice was small, and he didn’t make eye contact.

There was that lack of enthusiasm to leave again. Something was up. Tony patted the space next to him and Peter obeyed, dropping into it.

“You don’t wanna go and see that incredibly attractive Aunt of yours?”

Peter gave him an uncomfortable look. “Of course I do. *I really* do. It’s just...complicated...”

Tony remembered Happy mentioning that May had told him about the new family she’d acquired whilst he’d been away.

“Look, if you don’t like the step-uncle, I can just send a suit over there to...” He mimicked throat slitting.

Peter’s eyebrows shot up and he barked a short laugh. “Er, thanks, I think? I’m sure all...that...will be fine. If May is happy, I’m happy.”

Tony saw Peter’s eyes dart to Tony’s injured arm and away again.

“I’m in good hands here, Underoos.” Tony said softly. His chest ached in need to reassure the Kid that it was OK for him to leave. Other than being pulled away under duress by the team, Peter had been at the hospital or sleeping the whole time they’d been in Wakanda.

“I know.” Peter looked down at his hands. “It’s just, once I’m back in New York, how will I come and visit? It’s not exactly down the road.”

So that was his apprehension.

“It’s going to be complicated for a while. From what I understand, the world is upside down at the moment. We’ll stay in touch, funnily enough we have a lot of modern technology available to us here.” Tony raised his voice. “The Warden over there might even let me have a phone in a few days.”

Pepper frowned and shook her head. She’d been adamant that he wasn’t to be worrying himself with the rest of the happenings in the world right now. That he had to properly recuperate. He’d considered pushing back – wasn’t that just who he was – but he realised that he actually couldn’t. His body was a mess and he needed to let it heal; as dull as that was.

“Maybe in a week?”

She tilted her head in not quite a nod, but it gave him hope that he could work on her. The Stark charm usually, wait no, *occasionally*, worked on her.

“See – we’ll keep in touch.” Peter seemed slightly cheered by that or at the very least gave him a less forced smile. “You better go before Happy has a coronary about not being on time.”

Peter went to get up, but Tony caught his arm – impressed that he’d been able to; normal bodily control was not happening yet. “Come here Kid.”

He beckoned him forward and into the one-armed hug he was capable of giving. He felt Peter’s heart beating hard against his and he cupped his hand onto the back of his head. Peter pulled back after a few moments, surreptitiously wiping his eyes as he sat up.

Tony felt a sadness creep over him as he watched the Kid walk out the door with Happy.

“Are you worried he will disappear again Daddy?” Morgan asked, as Pepper put her down on the bed next to him, where she snuggled into him.

“I’m just going to miss him, that’s all.” Tony said, his chest feeling that bit heavier as he stroked her hair.

Peter

Peter had been glad for once that Happy was content with silence from him. During the long plane ride home, he’d tried to sleep. Happy had snapped at him once to ‘*stop jiggling your god damn leg*’. There was something reassuring in Happy being, well, like Happy again.

By the time the jet had landed, and they started to get into the car, he was exhausted. The roads were busy, and Peter could see scores of people outside Government buildings.

“What’s going on?” Peter said, almost to himself.

“Half the population have come back and found that other people have moved into their homes and jobs in the last five years. There is a lot of red tape to sort this mess out.”

“Oh,” Peter said. He was sure the same must be happening in Wakanda, but he’d been shielded from it when he was mostly at the hospital all the time.

“Not that we wouldn’t want you all back of course. Just a bureaucratic nightmare.” Happy said quickly, his eyes darting to Peter’s in the back. “SI are sorting out resources to help.”

The streets started to look familiar and Peter sat up when Happy took a wrong turn.

“Um, Happy, sir, I think you missed the exit.”

“Your Aunt moved to a new apartment a few years back.”

“She did?” Peter hadn’t gotten that information from the conversations he’d had with May. Or maybe she had mentioned it and he’d missed it.

His stomach dropped. “Does she still live in Forest Hills?” He couldn’t imagine being Spider-man in a different part of the city.

“No, but not too far - and still in Queens.” Happy getting what he was thinking right away.

Peter relaxed. That was something.

They pulled up to a nice-looking apartment block. The kind that looked like it might have a working lift for once. They got out and Peter realised that he didn’t have any bags or anything. He’d been grateful for the clothes that King T’Challa’s people had organised for him, otherwise he would have turned up in scrubs.

“Thanks for the lift Happy. What number was it?”

“3224. But I’m going to come up with you.”

“That’s OK.” Peter said, shoving his hands in his pockets.

“Geez kid, of course I’m coming up with you.” Happy said firmly. “Besides, Tony would kill me if I didn’t.”

Peter felt relieved. He felt sick as they rode up in the elevator. He didn’t know how to feel – he was excited to see May, but he had no idea what to expect of her husband and her child.

‘Hi, I’m Peter who used to be May’s nephew, but we are only related by marriage, not blood, and I have been dead for five years, but now I am not.’

He felt lightheaded and he put a hand on the side of the lift wall to steady himself.

“Are you doing alright there, Peter?” Happy said, concern reflected in his eyes.

“Yeah, must be jet lag or something.”

“Uh huh,” Happy said, but didn’t press.

Peter followed Happy, stopping short when he did. “You ready?”

Could he just say no and then they get out of here? Peter simply nodded and Happy stepped back for him to knock on the door. He did gently. Almost instantly, the door sprang open and there was May.

He didn’t have time to speak before she pulled him into a deep hug. He wrapped his arms around her, feeling the familiar way she fit against his body and comforted by the fact that she still smelt of her usual perfume. He relaxed slightly – it was the one and only Aunt May. He felt her shudder against him, the sound of any cries muffled by her hair against his ear. He felt like he should be crying too but he felt, well nothing, right now. He opened his eyes then and saw a man. The hairs on his arm stood up. This must be Kevin. He must have stiffened as Aunt May pulled away.

“Peter, this is Kevin.”

She stood back and Kevin, smiling broadly, reached out his hand to Peter, who instinctively shook it. The grip was tight and followed by his other hand latching onto Peter’s arm and he managed to repress a shudder at the unexpected contact until after Kevin let go.

“It is so good to meet you. I never thought I’d get to.” Kevin spoke and Peter took a moment to take him in. He was tall and broad shouldered, wearing smart jeans and a shirt. He had short-cut dark hair and blue eyes, which Peter could see were clouded with emotion now.

There was a cough from behind and they all looked in the direction of the doorway. Happy was, of course, still there.

“Oh Happy!” Aunt May exclaimed and threw her arms around him in a hug. Peter noticed Kevin stiffen slightly at this. “Thank you for bringing my boy home.”

Happy looked surprised at the hug and Peter could see him start to blush.

“Will you come and have some tea?” May stepped back.

“Thanks, but it’s been a long journey. I’ll leave you to enjoy your family.” He smiled at May and then indicated his head to Peter who came to the door.

“You OK?”

Peter lied with a nod.

“OK, I’ll be in contact.”

“You will?”

“I will.” Happy said firmly, holding his eye. He clapped him on the shoulder before heading off down the corridor.

Peter took a breath before heading back in to ‘enjoy his family.’

Peter opened one eye to see a pair of blue ones staring back at him from across the room. He opened another and took in the small boy sitting crossed legged two feet away from him. The little boy tilted his head to the side and his shaggy brown hair moved as he did. He looked a lot like May when he did that.

Peter sat up on his elbows.

“Hi, you must be Alfie,” he said, keeping his voice soft. The little boy nodded. Having spent the last ten days with the very forward Miss Morgan Stark, this boy seemed a different kettle of fish.

The boy slowly got up, inching towards Peter. He stretched his finger over and prodded Peter's forearm, his eyebrows jumping up when he felt the flesh.

"You're real." His eyes were wide in astonishment. "Are you an angel?"

Peter could understand how confusing this must be for a kid. Hell, it was confusing for him too.

"No, I'm just Peter," he replied.

"Alfie?" He heard Kevin's whispered voice from in the corridor.

The already half-opened door creaked as it was pushed a little wider.

"Alfie!" Kevin's voice softly admonished. "I told you to leave him alone."

He held out his hand and the little boy went straight to him.

"Sorry Peter, I hope he didn't wake you."

Peter sat up more. "No, it's fine."

"Since you are up, we are just about to have breakfast. Are you hungry?" Kevin asked.

Peter was starving, having not eaten much yesterday due to nerves. He nodded.

Kevin smiled, "Come out when you're ready."

Peter pulled on yesterday's clothes, since he didn't have anything else, and made his way out into the heart of the apartment. It was a similar layout to his and May's old place, with a central living/dining/kitchen area and bedrooms and bathrooms running off of it. There was a third, pretty small, bedroom here, that Peter had been told Kevin used as his weights room, and that's where

Peter had slept last night.

Alfie was sat up at the kitchen island, a colouring book and crayons in front of him. Kevin had his back to him, whisking something on the counter.

“Scrambled eggs OK for you Peter?” Kevin asked, turning his body around.

“Yes sir,” Peter replied, “can I help at all?”

Kevin shook his head with a warm smile. Peter scanned the room briefly and couldn’t see or hear any movement in the rest of the apartment from Aunt May.

“Um, where is May?” He asked, feeling uncomfortable with these essentially strangers.

Kevin turned back round, putting some cutlery down on the table. “She didn’t sleep well last night, so I didn’t want to wake her.”

Peter had heard her creep into his room on two occasions at least and gently stroke his hair, so he was glad that she was finally asleep. He would have probably done the same thing if the shoe was on the other foot. Actually, if Kevin hadn’t been there, he knew they would have ended up sleeping in the same room, curled up on her big bed like they had before when he was little and later, after Ben.

Alfie was still colouring, but Peter could also see him taking quick peeks at him in his peripheral vision.

Peter leant over and picked up the one set of plastic cutlery with two teddy bears on the handle. He made a show of putting them down in front of him, noting the little boy’s eyes widen as he did.

“Hey! Those aren’t for you!” he exclaimed.

“They aren’t?” Peter displayed mock shock. “But I love teddy bears. Are you sure?”

Peter tried not to laugh at the very serious expression on Alfie's face as he nodded.

"Oh, right, why don't you have them then?" He put them down next to Alfie.

The kid looked at him from under his eyebrows again before edged his colouring book closer to him. "Do you want to colour with me?"

"Sure," said Peter, pleased the boy was warming up to him. He picked up a yellow crayon and started to colour in the sun. It was a dinosaur picture.

"You like dinosaurs?"

Alfie nodded.

"His favourite thing to talk about..." Kevin said without turning around, the sizzle of butter coming from the pan.

"Do you have a favourite dinosaur?" Peter said, pointing at the picture.

"Diplodocus," Alfie said.

Peter was impressed he knew the name. He also thought that most kids that age would be drawn for the more explosive dinosaurs like the T-Rex.

"Did you know that the Diplodocus is thought to have weighed like 10-15 tons – so as much as a large truck?" Peter said.

"Cool," said Alfie, his eyes lighting up.

"And they weren't even the heaviest dinosaurs – the Brachiosaurus weighed twice that; around 30 tons." Peter continued, slightly impressed with himself that he had dredged that knowledge up from somewhere deep in his memory.

Kevin turned around then with two steaming plates of scrambled eggs and toast. “Put that away now Alfie please.”

Peter helped Alfie collate the crayons and book to one side.

Kevin came back with a third smaller plate for Alfie; Peter could make out some sort of cartoon character beneath the food.

“Thank you,” he said as Kevin sat across from him.

“You’re welcome Peter.” Kevin replied.

They all ate in silence for a while. Peter was starving and his was soon gone. He was still hungry, but he didn’t want to seem impolite.

“May told me you were into Science,” Kevin gestured towards the dinosaur book with the fork in his hand.

“Yeah, and I like to dabble with computers a bit, building them from old parts.”

“You must be pretty smart to get into Midtown. And May said that you’d had an internship at Stark Industries before all this.” He gestured into the air like that described the complexities of the Snap or the Blip like the TV stations seemed to be calling it.

“I-I was pretty lucky.” Peter heard himself stammer. He didn’t know what May had told Kevin – what if she had told him about Spider-man? The idea that she had, filled him with dread.

“You into any sports?” Kevin asked and Peter was glad that he had moved on.

“Not really,” admitted Peter. “I’m not all that athletic.”

Kevin looked disappointed but didn't say anything as he went back to eating his eggs. Peter felt awkward but didn't know what to say- he'd never been good at talking to new people. When the other two had finished, Peter jumped up and took the plates to the sink, which earned him a welcome nod from Kevin.

"Alfie, go and get your shoes on ready to go. We leave for Mrs Clyde's in 5 minutes."

"Do I have to go today? I want to play dinosaurs with Peter." Alfie said.

Peter felt a small jolt of warmth that Alfie wanted to spend time with him, even if it was just to fuel his dinosaur habit.

"Mommy and Peter need to have a catch up, and I have work." Kevin patted his head. "Besides, it's Friday. Same as any other Friday."

Alfie sighed but went off to his room.

Kevin came and stood next to him as he filled the sink with warm water and soap.

"With our kind of jobs, we keep to a routine for Alfie as much as possible." Kevin said, his face looking more serious.

From last night's initial catch up session, he had learned that Kevin was a police officer with the NYPD, which meant that he worked shifts, just like May did as a nurse.

"Sure," said Peter. He was used to dealing with May's changing shift pattern and looking after himself when she wasn't there.

"Yes, so we want to continue as much of that routine as we can." Kevin said, crossing his arms across his chest and leaning against the counter. "Dinner is at 6 every night and we expect you to clean up after yourself and around the house."

Wow, Peter hadn't expected Kevin to go about laying down house rules so soon. He and May had a relaxed way of doing things. Sure, they didn't live in a show home, but it was clean and fairly

tidy most of the time; they both pitched in equally. Now he thought about it, there wasn't a single thing out of place in this apartment. Kevin obviously had a thing for order.

"May and I always split the chores. That's no problem." Peter said.

"As for your curfew- " Kevin began, but Peter cut him off.

"-I'll talk to May about it." There was no way Peter was going to let this stranger dictate his movements.

A look of irritation flashed over Kevin's face. Peter didn't get to find out what was really going through his head as they both heard the shuffle of May's feet.

"You should've woken me," she said, despite letting a yawn out.

Kevin went over to her and enveloped her in a hug. Peter cringed – it was so weird to suddenly see someone else touching her.

"I better get ready for work." Kevin disappeared off in the direction of their bedroom at the same time May reached him and gave him a big hug. Last night he had pretty much spent the whole time encased in her arms. He was big on hugs, so it wasn't hard for him to indulge her, even if her intensity was unsettling. He'd probably be the same if the shoe was on the other foot. He returned her hug with gusto.

"Coffee?" He asked.

"Oh, I have sworn off it nowadays."

"What?!" May's coffee habit had been almost as bad as Mr Stark's.

"Yep, Kevin helped wean me off of it. I'll go for a green tea though."

The world really did feel upside down as he searched through the cupboards, finding the teabags

through sheer luck alone, and filled the kettle. He turned around once it was on and caught May staring at him.

She sat up. "Sorry, it's just so surreal."

"Mommy!" Alfie came over, shoes now on and she picked him up and placed him on the counter, showering him with kisses.

"Speaking of surreal..." said Peter, watching her help him into his jacket.

May tilted her head at him. "All this will take some getting used to for everyone."

It really would. And as Kevin came out, he wasn't so sure he was going to like this new normal.

"Let's get going then Alf." Kevin scooped him up, laying a kiss on May's cheek. "See you Peter."

Peter returned Kevin's easy smile; none of the tension on his face from earlier showing.

Once the door had closed, May enveloped him in another hug before guiding him up to the kitchen stools next to her, keeping his hand in hers.

"Right, we need to make a plan for today. Unfortunately, I have a shift at the hospital tonight. I tried to rearrange it but there are a lot more patients than usual due to the Blip. I don't want to leave you, but Kevin and Alfie will be here." May looked devastated.

"I totally understand, people need you." Truthfully, some time to himself wouldn't be a bad thing.

"But we have the whole of today together. We're going to need to get you some new clothes. I-I didn't keep all your stuff after...I gave it to Goodwill. I have a box of sentimental stuff..." May looked uncomfortable.

"I understand May. It was five years." Peter tried to reassure her, but he battled between a logical, rational, response and an emotional one. If he was being truthful, it still stung.

“And we will have to order you a new bed. With everything going on right now, I’m not sure that I’ll be able to get it here soon. You’re welcome to try the couch if the blow-up bed isn’t comfortable. Or maybe Alfie could come in with us...” May started to look a little overwhelmed.

“May, the blow-up bed is fine. Better for Alfie to have as much normality as possible.” Peter remembered Kevin’s aggravated look. “It must be weird for him. He asked me if I was an angel this morning.”

Her grip on his hand increased. “I may have told him a few too many stories about you. And then of course there is his name. He might idolise you a bit.”

“His name?”

May’s eyes caught his. “Alfred Peter Hayes.”

“Oh,” Peter’s throat caught, and May’s hand tightened in his.

“I missed you so much,” she said, as she laid her head on his shoulder.

Chapter End Notes

Random question for people hotter on grammar than I am (so basically anyone) - when Tony refers to Peter as 'the kid' should it be like that or 'the Kid' with a capital K? He refers to him that way a lot in this fic so I wanted to make sure I had it right and consistently the same!

Thank you for reading. Comments welcomed -help a newbie out :-)

I set up a Tumblr but I'll be honest I'm clueless about it so hit me up there and teach me your ways. Seriously, please do, I have no idea what to do!

<https://www.tumblr.com/blog/spagbol99>

I also have a Wattpad for my original works - check it out if you like stuff in a similar vein. Think family drama, tragedy and some angst.

<https://www.wattpad.com/user/Spagbol99>

As I mentioned, I am new to the fandom so I don't have a beta. If anyone fancies it, let me know.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Thank you to everyone for their continued support!

Here is the next chapter - it was going to be longer, but I changed my mind and split it into 2 chapters at the last moment. How is everyone finding the chapter lengths? The first two were around 5K but this one is 3.7K Do you prefer longer or shorter?

A day spent at the mall was not Peter's idea of fun, but it was a necessity. May kept his hand firmly in hers as they traipsed around the crowded shops; she swapped sides at one point with a laugh when their entwined hands became a sweaty ball. He tried to keep purchases to a minimum but even with buying only a skeleton wardrobe, the amount soon racked up. Even with two incomes, he could tell that money wasn't exactly overflowing for them. He doubted they had a 'returned from the dead' replenishment fund tucked away for this purpose.

They'd been recuperating on the sofa when May answered a knock at the door.

"Happy!" Peter turned at May's surprised voice.

"Come in," she managed to usher him in this time, and he smiled at them both. He was carrying a large package in his hands.

"Happy, you're back?" Peter said, with a questioning look.

"I don't get time off it seems," he grunted. "I don't want to interrupt; just that Tony wanted to make sure I delivered this to you as soon as possible."

He handed the package off to Peter. "Should I...?" Peter gestured to it.

"Knock yourself out."

Peter felt a shiver run through him as he opened the box. On top of another larger box was a brand-new Starkphone.

“What is this?” Peter pulled out the sleek device, running his hands along the smooth design.

“Tony said he figured you’d be without a phone.” Happy said.

“But these are like, ridiculously expensive. I-I can’t accept this...” Peter looked over at Aunt May, who raised an eyebrow.

“He anticipated you would say that and said to tell you, and I quote, *“If Morgan can’t video chat with you, she will cry.”* Happy smirked.

Peter frowned. Mr Stark was always trying to push expensive gifts on him, and it made him uncomfortable. He liked hanging out with Tony; he never wanted him to think he was doing it to get something out of it. God, he felt sick every time he considered how much money all the Spider-suits must have cost.

“It’s very generous of him; we graciously accept.” May said, earning a confused look from Peter. She was usually with him on not accepting extravagant gifts from Mr Stark. She tilted her head and gave a small shrug. “The man saved the world, let him spoil you a bit if he wants to.”

May’s perspective softened him. Knowing Tony, there were a million trackers in that phone that would put at ease the mother hen tendencies he liked to pretend that he didn’t have. If it made him feel better, and Peter got a kick-ass phone, well it would be rude not to, right?

Resigned, he put the phone box to the side and opened up the bigger box. It was a case with a panel designed for handprint recognition on it, so Peter put his hand on it. The lid immediately retracted to show a Spider-man suit. There was a typed note on top: *Take care of NYC for me until I get back. – TS.*

“You fixed it already?” Peter asked, amazed.

“You know Tony; he always has back-ups. He said it’s pretty similar to your original one and to just ask Karen for info.”

“Sweet!” Peter ran his hands through the fabric. “At least Alfie won’t be able to open it if he finds

the box.” And Kevin too.

Happy grinned. “Check this out.” He flicked a hidden switch and the box seemed to disappear. “It uses the same cloaking technology that is on the jet.”

“Wow!” Peter was relieved, he could stick it in the bottom of the wardrobe, and no-one would see it.

May looked flabbergasted by this technology – she reached out and picked up the note. “I’m not sure how I feel about you Spider-manning at the moment.” Her brow was furrowed.

“Well, of course that’s for you and Peter to discuss. Tony just wanted him to be equipped, if he should need to be.” Happy said smoothly and May simply nodded, placing the card back down quietly.

“Right, I gotta go,” Happy said, “Pepper wants me working with the Stark Industries Displacement Taskforce. Somehow she’s more demanding than Tony.” He made a face and Peter grinned back.

“Bye and thanks, Happy,” Peter said, closing the door behind him with a smile.

“I don’t want you going out as Spider-man,” May said instantly, the haunted look in her eyes causing the smile to slide right off his face.

“What? Why?!”

“It’s too dangerous.”

“I’ll be fine May, and the suit protects me so much too...”

“I can’t risk losing you again Peter, I can’t.” May’s voice was full of hurt and loss and just *pain* as she slumped against the back of the sofa.

Peter’s heart clenched: it was hard to argue with that. She’d lost him – *grieved* him. He’d feel the

same way. He scooped her into a tight hug, feeling her tears on his neck.

She pulled away and wiped her face. When she spoke, she was quiet; “I’m not saying forever. Just, right now, I need to know that you’re safe. That you’re here.”

“OK, Aunt May, I understand.” He led her to the couch and sat her down, wrapping an arm around her shoulder, and her head on his chest.

He looked at the sea of photos in front of him; before and after the Blip sections evident. A whole new life she had lived without him.

“Did you...” he paused, not sure if this was the right time to ask. “...did you tell Kevin about Spider-man?”

She shook her head into his chest.

“Why not?” he asked, curious. “I mean, I was...gone.”

“I talked about you all the time sweetie, but Spider-man - it wasn’t my secret to tell. Besides, I told him about the person I loved that I’d lost – Peter Parker. That was what was important.” She hugged him tighter, but it wasn’t her grip that made his chest hurt.

—

Peter and May spent the rest of the day playing catch up. He told her about Space, Titan and the Battle of Earth and she told him about what had happened in her last five years. He learned more about how she’d met Kevin at a Grief Support Group. He’d lost his colleague and friend from work in the Blip. He’d helped her when she’d been at her lowest. Peter’s chest ached at the thought to her alone and grieving; followed by a fierce anger that he’d not been here. Fucking Thanos. Kevin had been there for her and he was glad that she’d found someone that’d helped her.

Kevin came home with Alfie around 5pm and Peter was whisked off by the small boy to show him all his Dinosaurs until dinner had been called for bang-on 6pm – Kevin obviously had been serious about that. Peter spent most of his time quietly listening to Kevin talk about his day at the

Precinct, which seemingly had been taken over dealing with all the displaced people. He seemed annoyed that this was part of his job now and Peter couldn't help noticing that empathy wasn't his strong suit. Peter kept waiting for May to step in and debate with him, like she always had with Ben if she thought he was wrong about something. May was one of the most empathic people he knew, but she just seemed to smile indulgently whilst helping Alfie with his meal. Kevin seemed like he needed to let off steam, so maybe she was just letting him vent.

May had left to get to her late shift as soon as dinner was done, and Peter felt strange being in the apartment without her. He washed up the dishes as Kevin took Alfie for a bath. When they were done and drying on the rack, his phone beeped.

He pulled it out; no one other than May had his number yet.

Unknown number : Underoos, it's Tony.

Peter grinned.

PP : Mr Stark! I didn't think you were allowed a phone yet?

Unknown number : I hijacked one for a minute, so I can only message briefly. Don't tell the Boss.

Unknown number : How's it going over there?

PP : Pretty weird. But all fine.

PP : Thank you for the phone. It's too much.

Unknown number : Zip it. Humour a slightly older man by accepting it.

PP : Slightly older?

Unknown number : I walked into that one.

Unknown number: *Gotta go; Physio-terrorists are coming. No, that is not a misspell: they are evil.*

PP : *Bye then Mr S.*

Unknown : *Bye kiddo ☺*

Peter felt a big grin spread over his face: the tension he hadn't noticed in his stomach loosening a bit.

"Where did you get that?" Peter looked up to see Kevin frowning at him; carrying a wet Alfie wrapped up in a dinosaur themed towel. "They cost a fortune."

"Oh, Mr Stark realised I wouldn't have a phone anymore and sent one over," Peter said.

"Hmmm," Kevin said, his face still frowning, but didn't elaborate further as Alfie started twisting in his arms. "Let's get you ready for bed buddy." Kevin's voice was soft as he took Alfie to his bedroom.

Peter retreated to his bedroom: the plastic of the inflatable bed squeaking under the pressure of his weight. He pulled his phone out: now he was finally alone, he could start to look for Ned and maybe for MJ too. May hadn't wanted to let him out of her sight all day and always hated him being on his phone when they were spending time together, so it had stayed firmly in his pocket. He owed her his full attention.

He signed into his most used social media site and his heart jumped when he saw he had recent messages from Ned and MJ. There were several messages from Ned, spanning from the day after the Battle.

Ned: *Peter, are you OK? Everything is so confusing now. My Mom said that you Blipped. I tried May but the number wasn't working anymore.*

Ned: *I spoke to MJ and she Blipped too. She said she hadn't heard from you either. It says online that Spider-man was sucked up onto the spaceship. You could be anywhere.*

***Ned:** I tried to contact Mr Stark, but no one would help me. Tried hacking his system but my Mom's laptop is a piece of crap.*

***Ned:** I miss you man.*

Yesterday there was another message.

***Ned:** I hope you're OK. If you're out there - here is the landline of where I am: 718-544-2484*

Before he called, he quickly looked at MJ's solo message:

***MJ:** What's up, loser?*

He let out a snort. She sounded just the same. He quickly sent her a reply saying he was OK and that he blipped, before he dialled the number.

"Hello," It was a woman's voice that he didn't recognise

"Um, hi, would I please be able to speak to Ned, Ned Leeds?"

"Hold on," The voice said; and he could hear the woman call for Ned and he could hear Ned's voice in the background asking who it was. His heart rate raised until the familiar voice came on the line.

"Um, hello?"

His throat clenched at the sound so when he spoke his voice was higher.

"Ned?"

There was a gasp from the other end.

“Peter! Oh Peter. Are you OK? When you didn’t respond to my messages and then I talked to MJ and she hadn’t heard from you, I thought maybe...” Ned sounded like he was going to take off, he was hyperventilating so much.

“I-I’m OK. I just got stuck in Wakanda and well...”

“Wakanda!”

“Yeah, it’s a long story. You blipped...right?” Peter hesitated, it sounded like he had from his messages, but he still felt guilty that he *so* wanted the answer to be yes.

“Yes, but my sister didn’t and now she’s older than me and in college.”

“Woah!” Peter had been friends with Ned since middle school and been around his little sister a lot – her being an adult – technically before them, was just odd. “That, that is crazy.”

There was a silence from Ned then and Peter’s hearing caught a slight sniff.

“Ned, what’s wrong?”

He heard Ned clear his throat.

“My Dad...last year...he...died.”

“What?!” Peter’s heart thumped in his chest. He could hear Ned trying not to cry.

“He had a heart attack.” The wobble in Ned’s voice spurred Peter to action; he started shoving his feet into his new shoes.

“I’m coming over.”

“You don’t have to...” Ned said, lamely.

“I’m coming over, Ned.” Peter said firmly, pressing the phone to his shoulder as he tied his laces.

“We moved...”

“You can see my number now, right? Text me the address.” Peter said, picking his jacket up.

“O-OK,” Ned said shakily.

“I’ll be there soon,” he added, tapping his phone off as he opened the door to his room and headed into the living area; grabbing his new jacket from where it hung by the door.

“Where are you going?” He turned to see Kevin, standing by the fridge with a bottle of beer.

“I’ve got to go and see my friend.”

Kevin stood taller. “Did May say you could?”

“It’s fine, she won’t mind.”

“You haven’t finished putting the dishes away,” Kevin said, a dark look washing over his features for the second time today.

Peter’s phone beeped and he looked down at it. It was Ned with his address. He had to get there now. Dishes could wait.

“Yeah, I have to go now, but I’ll do them when I get back.” Peter said, opening the door and giving him a tight smile before he closed it behind him.

Peter let himself really run as he followed the directions on his phone. Fifteen minutes later he arrived at the building to see Ned waiting outside. Relief coursed through him- he looked the same. *Of course he does, idiot.*

Peter didn't hesitate in hugging him tightly. After a few moments, Ned pulled away and they did their special handshake – both of them smiling as they did. But Peter could see that Ned's smile didn't quite reach all the way to his eyes.

Peter indicated with his head to a bench nearby.

“So, what happened with...?” Peter asked gently as they sat down.

He saw Ned's body tense.

“Mom found him one day last May, collapsed at home. He was already gone.”

Peter slid closer to him; pressing himself against his warm body.

“I'm really sorry Ned.”

Ned nodded his head as he leaned over his legs: a tear dropping onto his lap. Peter watched as it began to soak into the denim.

“You never told me it hurt this much.”

It was like a cold wind pushed through his lungs. Peter had been too young to really remember the grief of losing his father, but he remembered all too clearly how it felt when he lost Ben. Ned had been there for him every step of the way; and now he would be too.

“I know buddy.” Peter wrapped his arm around him and Ned leaned heavily against him. He worked hard to stop the bubble of emotions he felt come up; it wasn't about him right now, he had to be strong for Ned.

They sat there for a few minutes until Ned sat back and wiped his face.

“So, this is your new place?” Peter gestured behind him; moving to a more neutral conversation seemed best for now.

“Yeah,” Ned cleared his throat. “My mom moved in with my Aunt after Dad...so now I’m sharing a room with my twin 10-year-old cousins.” He made a face. “What about you? You came from a different direction.”

Peter winced. “Yeah, so May didn’t blip, but she did get married and had a kid.”

“What?!” Ned looked shocked – like that was more startling than his news.

“Yeah.” Peter breathed.

“What are they like?” Ned asked, his eyes wide.

“Her son – Alfie- is 4 and pretty sweet. And her husband Kevin...” He stopped himself from saying that he didn’t like him. That wasn’t fair. It had only been 24 hours. “Well, it’s only been a day. I don’t know them yet.”

Ned nodded; then looked up like he remembered something. “How come you ended up in Wakanda?”

Peter sat back and started to tell him the whole story.

Ned had to get back inside when it reached 9pm, so they’d said their goodbyes – *‘I can’t believe you went to space without me’* -and Peter started walking back to the apartment. He took the long route; he was in no rush. It would just be him and Kevin and he could do without *that* awkwardness. Ned’s loss was sitting heavily with him. It brought back all his thoughts of Ben and

how he should have saved him. Maybe if he'd done better on Titan, they would've stopped Thanos and then Ned would've had more time to spend with his Dad. He could hear Mr Stark's voice telling him not to be an idiot, but the feeling still settled: a heavy weight in his bones highlighted by repeated images of the life leaving Tony's face and Ben's blood on his hands. By the time he knocked on the door, he was emotionally exhausted.

The door opened to Kevin; a bottle of beer in his hand and his face setting into a hard look upon seeing him.

"Hey," Peter said nervously, stepping through the doorway; Kevin barely giving him enough room to get through. "Thanks."

Kevin didn't say anything, but Peter could feel his eyes on him as he hung his jacket on the peg next to the door; the Spidey sense at the back of his neck humming slightly.

He went over to the kitchen and started putting the now dry plates away. He heard Kevin move over to the sofa and the sound of the TV start again. As he put something in the bin, he noticed several empty bottles of beer in there. Was Kevin a big drinker? Peter wiped the sides down and looked back over to the sofas where Kevin was still sitting; the bottle in his hand now drained.

He cleared his throat; "Can I get you anything before I head to bed?"

The man didn't look at him but shook his head slightly.

"Um...OK, night then."

Kevin didn't respond and Peter withdrew to his room closing the door softly behind him. Was Kevin *sulking*? It seemed like Kevin was pissed off somehow and he was the cause. Should he go back out and try to talk to him? What would he even say? The hum at the back of his neck seemed to be telling him not to. He was never good at talking, let alone confrontation. He didn't know the dude, maybe it was nothing to do with him; judging from the dinner table conversation, Kevin's hadn't had a good day at work. Peter would just stay out of his way; it would blow over by tomorrow.

It was lunchtime the following day when there was a knock on the door of Peter's bedroom and Aunt May's head poked around it.

"You're up already!"

"Even with ear plugs in I could hear Peppa Pig through the wall, and then I couldn't get back to sleep." May looked shattered. It was lunchtime and she can only have had four hours sleep since she got back from the night shift.

"I can take Alfie out somewhere – if you think he'd be comfortable going with me?" Peter offered.

"That's sweet, but it seems Kevin had the same idea and has just taken him to the park." May said. "Come have drink with me?"

He smiled and followed her out to the kitchen.

"I'll do it Aunt May; you just relax." He rubbed her arm, and she sat on one of the stools. "Green tea?"

She nodded.

He flipped the kettle on and navigated his way around the cupboards with ease now he knew where everything was.

"You want something to eat?" Peter had made pancakes this morning; an olive branch to Kevin for whatever it was that he'd done to irritate him. Kevin had thanked him nicely enough and Alfie had carried the conversation, so things seemed OK now.

"No thank you sweetie, I'm good," she said as she stretched her arms up and let out a yawn.

"How was work?"

She sighed; the motion only seeming to highlight the dark circles under her eyes. "So, so hectic. I

don't think I stopped all night."

He frowned in sympathy. The kettle clicked and he poured both their mugs full and brought it over.

May hugged her mug to her body as Peter sat down across from her, pulling one knee up to his chest.

"Thank you, Peter." The way she said it, he knew she had something else to say.

"Look, there was something I wanted to talk to you about." May cleared her throat. "Last night, well, Kevin said that you went out without telling him where you were going..."

Peter frowned. "I told him I was going to see a friend."

May looked slightly sheepish. "He also said that you came back late."

"I was back before ten." Peter was starting to get a bit irritated at Kevin's misdirection. "I went to see Ned, he blipped too, and he'd just told me that his Dad died last year, so I was in a hurry to see him."

May's face crumpled. "His Dad died? Oh no, poor Ned. I must call his mother, we kinda fell out of contact. How awful. How is he?"

Peter breathed out. "Yeah. Not great. He needed me. I knew you wouldn't mind."

"Of course not. You totally should have gone to see him." She rubbed her hand on top of his: her palm warm from the mug. "Look, Kevin is a bit... old school. He likes to make sure everyone is OK, he feels like that is his role, and that includes you now."

Peter huffed. Last night didn't feel like protection; it felt like control. "So now I need to ask his permission any time I want to do something?"

“You...*don't*? I-I don't know. He isn't used to dealing with teenagers and...” May sighed.
“Look, all this is a lot to navigate...for everyone. Will you just try to get along with him?”

“I thought I was already doing that,” Peter said, his jaw clenching as he stared at the table.

“I know. I-I'm sorry.” May looked so confused and conflicted that it made his heart ache. He leant over for a hug.

“I'll- I'll try harder May,” he whispered.

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

How is Tony coping back in Wakanda?

And a little bit of fluff. Couldn't help myself.

Tony

Sweat dripped down off his nose as he tried to curl the small dumbbell in his grip. The muscles in his arm and hand just weren't responding how they were meant to.

"Come on Tony, you can do it. Give me another rep."

Maya, the physiotherapist, was fucking Satan dressed in tracksuit. She smiled sweetly at him, her dark, brown eyes watching him intently.

"If you don't shut up, I'm pretty sure I'm going to say something that will make T'Challa eject me from his country." Tony grit his teeth.

Maya quirked an eyebrow at him. "Sweetie, you are nothing compared to dealing with an injured member of the Dora Milaje."

There was a snort from the corner. Tony turned his sights on the source.

"You can shut it too, Rhodes."

"Ouch, I'm hurt Tones." Rhodey turned another page in his book, looking distinctly unbothered. "How can I give my moral support if I can't talk?"

Tony focussed his energy on his task, gradually starting to lift his forearm higher when suddenly his hand spasmed.

“Ah,” he gasped from the pain and the weight fell from his hand and thumped onto the floor. Again. “Damn it!” He punched the floor and pain splintered through his hand and up his arm.

He slipped off the weights bench and onto the floor; Maya by his side and Rhodey there a moment later. Tony shielded his face with his arm; hiding the frustrated tears threatening his eyes. Not his finest moment. It was just so frustrating – yesterday he had managed more reps but today; it was like he had regressed.

“Can you give us a minute?” He heard Rhodey say quietly and he heard footsteps walking away, before there was a whirr of leg braces and he felt the mat depress next to him.

Tony felt a familiar hand on his bad arm. Would that be however how he thought of his right arm now? His ‘bad’ arm. Would it ever go back to the way it was? He brought his arm down a little and cracked an eye open to take a look at his best friend. When Rhodey got injured in Germany, he seemed to take it so well. Never once complained, or let it hold him back. The man couldn’t walk without tech and here he was losing his cool after a few short weeks of rehabbing one arm. He propped himself up on his ‘good’ arm.

“Teach me your ways, Obi Wan.”

Rhodey looked at him and smirked. “You’ve been spending too much time with the kid.”

Tony shrugged back with a smile as he pulled himself up to sitting so he was leaning his weight against his friend. He flexed his hand; wincing at the pain.

“Remember when we were in college and you’d get so caught up with your inventions that when it came to exams, you’d end up cramming all night?” Rhodey’s eyes were soft with nostalgia.

“Yeah, and you’d lecture me every semester that I should do ‘slow and steady revision’ all term like you.” Tony rolled his eyes. “Like I didn’t ace every test any way.”

Rhodey smiled indulgently at him; not phased by his friend's self-confidence after all these years.

“Tones, you can't cram your way through this. Healing is not linear.”

Rhodey's eyes held his for a long moment before Tony ducked his head and let out a sigh. “I'm not known for my patience, Honey Bear.”

Rhodey snorted. “No shit,” he said, as he got to his feet. “You are, however, pretty good at overcoming the odds.” Rhodey reached out his hand and Tony grasped it. “How else would you have gotten Pepper to agree to marry you?”

Tony flashed him a toothy grin as he let himself be helped up. “No one was more surprised than me...”

Tony's days of rest, rehab and recuperation started to bleed into each other. Pepper refused for him to be part of the crew who were rebuilding the time machine – as much as it pained him, Bruce and Shuri had it under control and had been recreating it off the original schematics. Bruce had popped by yesterday, when Pepper wasn't there, to update on their progress, which Tony was all too aware was more to massage his ego than any real need of his expertise. Still, it was nice to offer his (unneeded) commentary and feel useful for what felt like the first time in a long time. Which he guessed was the point of the visit.

Tony was conflicted – he was starting to feel much better; the Cradle sessions had been brutal in the early days, leaving him exhausted and in agony, but the pain was controlled much better now, and the mental fog and fatigue had lessened. But he hadn't pushed helping with Pepper too much. He could see the strain in her eyes every time he exerted himself, whether that was in rehab or even talking to people for too long. The Doctor had only confirmed what he suspected – that it had been touch and go at the beginning – he'd died on the field, even for only a short while. He knew if it'd been the other way around, he'd be wrapping her up in so much cotton wool that she'd probably suffocate. So, he bit his tongue and tried not to do too much. Look at that, surely that counts as personal growth?

When he wasn't being tortured by the physiotherapists, he was now allowed to go between the

recliner and the bed, a freedom for which he was apparently meant to be thankful for. The recliner was pretty comfortable, and the mechanism was so smooth that he was dying to take it apart to see how it worked – the Wakandan tech was incredible – but he figured his hosts, and his wife, would not take to kindly to that. Maybe when the kid next came to visit he could convince him to have a look? Even Pepper couldn't say no to the Bambi eyes.

“Knock knock,” There was a rapping sound accompanying the vocals and Tony smiled seeing Steve in the doorway.

“Capsicle! How goes it?”

Tony watched Steve slip into the room, graceful despite his wide stature. “Pretty good, Tony. How's the rehab going?” Steve perched on the edge of the bed opposite him.

“Do I look like someone who makes a good patient?”

“I do have a vague memory of having to lock you in the Medbay after you got taken out by an EMP during that Iranian embassy attack.” A wry smile graced his lips and his blue eyes glinted.

Tony snorted at the memory. “To be fair, my arm was only *slightly* broken, and the guy was still out there.”

“Which I had Nat and Clint on...”

“Yeah, well, painkillers make me loopy.” Tony shifted in the chair, his strapped-up arm twinging as he did.

“The family still out visiting the goats?”

Tony shook his head in disbelief. “Yeah, did you know Bucky kept goats? Would they even still be the same ones from before? Anyway, lifecycle of a goat aside, I wasn't sure who seemed more excited; Terminator or the 4-year-old.”

Steve smiled again, his eyes lingering on Tony's face for a beat longer than normal. Tony knew

he wasn't the most observant, but even he could see the tightness around Steve's eyes.

"Everything okay with the rebuild, right? Bruce said it was up and running..." Maybe they needed his help after all.

Steve's mouth quirked upwards slightly, and he gave a firm nod. "Yep, I'm actually heading over there shortly to take the Stones back."

"Great, probably better to get them back sooner rather than later before some nasty alternative realities pop up." Tony had been anxious that it be done. It'd only been a few weeks, but there were so many unknowns with what they had done, it made him nervous. "Did you get the short straw?"

Steve smiled. "No, I volunteered."

"Of course you did, Spangles. Can't let me have my glory moment for too long, huh?" Tony gave him a crooked smile that Steve returned, shaking his head gently like he always did at Tony's jibing.

The door burst open; Morgan catapulting into the room and straight up into his lap. He exhaled at the force.

"Oh my God, they had baby goats Daddy." Morgan put her tiny hands on his cheeks and squeezed and she might as well have been doing that to his heart. "*Baby* goats."

"Kids," Tony corrected.

"No, Daddy *baby* goats!" Morgan looked dangerously close to rolling her eyes at him.

Tony caught Steve hiding a smile beneath his hand and didn't bother to correct her again.

"It was a big hit," he looked up to see Pepper coming in, with Barnes hovering behind.

“So I can see.”

Morgan wriggled off his lap and up onto Steve’s lap. “Have you seen them Uncle Steve?” Morgan asked, practically vibrating.

“Sure have,” Steve replied with a gooey smile on his face as he ran his hand over her mop of hair.

Morgan leant forward and stage whispered; “Did you know there is one named after you?”

“Really?” Steve’s eyes flicked from her to Bucky.

“Yeah, it was the ugliest one, so it made sense.” Bucky’s voice rose just loud enough to hear, and his Brooklyn accent shone through.

Tony snorted. Huh, so Barnes has some snark. Noted. Tony hadn’t spent any time with the man what with the whole ‘trying to kill him’ thing and then his years in Wakanda, and then he was Snapped. He’d known pretty soon after Siberia that what happened with his parents wasn’t Barnes’ fault – he was mind-controlled- but logic and emotion don’t always catch up to each other. Time had mellowed his feelings though - five years ago he certainly wouldn’t have entertained the idea of his wife and daughter going on an outing with him. See, personal growth. More evidence right there.

Tony tried not to chuckle as Steve sent a glare to Bucky over Morgan’s head which was just met with a smirk from the man on the receiving end.

“So, can we get one, Daddy?” Tony’s attention was suddenly back on his daughter. Oh shit, she had the baby browns on him. Do not make eye contact, do not – oh no.

“Um...”

Pepper made a throat slashing gesture from behind Steve.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.” Tony cleared his throat. “Surely Gerald will get jealous?”

“Yes, but he should learn to share, like you always say, right?”

Tony hoped his panicked expression was clear to Pepper. Morgan knew which buttons to press. She knew how to get him to say yes. Clearly not that *that* was difficult. This is why they had an Alpaca.

Tony’s parenting instinct suddenly kicked in. Distraction. “You’ll never guess who rang while you were out? I’ll give you some hints: much less handsome than Daddy; likes to hang from the ceiling.”

“Peter!” Her face morphed back into excitement. “Can I call him back right now?”

“Let’s go to the courtyard; we can ring him from there and tell him all about the Goats.” Pepper said, reaching out her hand.

Morgan vaulted from Steve’s lap. “Bye Uncle Steve, bye Uncle Bucky.”

Tony just caught a shocked expression ripple over Barnes’ face before he frantically pulled out his phone.

“Just gotta give the kid a head’s up.” He tapped as fast as he could with one hand.

The phone picked up after one ring.

“Hey Mr Stark!” Peter’s voice was full of enthusiasm, but Tony didn’t have time for that.

“Kid, listen. Morgan is gonna call you. Pretend that you rang to speak to her earlier. Do not encourage goats. I repeat, do *not* encourage goats.”

Silence hung for half a second.

“Goats *are* pretty cool, Mr Stark. And Morgan told me last week that Gerald gets lonely.”

“Unless you wanna be sleeping with Gerald when you visit, I suggest you change your opinion on Goats.”

There was a stifled chuckle from the other end of the line.

“Fine. I’ll take that as one invitation to visit though. Oh, gotta go, she’s calling. ByeMrStark!”

Tony let out a breath and put the phone away to see the two super soldiers looking at him with amused expressions. OK, well Barnes was slightly less scowl-y, so he took that to mean amused.

“How’d I end up knowing so many assholes with super-hearing?” Tony muttered, “Laugh it up, Odd Couple.”

Steve’s face pulled into a wider smile. “He’s a good kid.”

“He’s a little shit. Don’t let him fool you.”

That only seemed to make them smile more. Seeing their fondness for Peter reminded him that he’d wanted to talk to them.

“Speaking of which, he isn’t going back out on Spidey patrol yet. His Aunt is understandably keeping close tabs on him. But that won’t last. I don’t know when I’ll be back Stateside and even then, I don’t think I’m going to be able to back him up, if needed, for, well, a while.” Tony held up his bad arm. “Can I count on you guys to help him out?”

Oh look, now admitting weakness and asking for help. His previous therapists would be peeing their pants right now. Personal growth. Top marks. On fire. Nailed it.

“He can handle himself pretty well. He’s strong and quick,” Steve said, leaning back on one arm.

“Yeah, he probably won’t need help, but he also likes to throw himself into situations without

thinking about exit strategies.”

“So, he is like Steve...” Barnes said dryly.

“Hey!” Steve protested. Tony laughed; maybe having Barnes around to gang up on Steve could be fun.

“Yep – no self-preservation instincts. Thinks he has to save everybody. Sound familiar?”

Steve rolled his eyes at the two of them.

“What do you need us to do?” Barnes straightened up; all business. “Follow him on patrol?”

Tony grimaced. As much as he would love that, he knows Peter would hate it. It would make him feel overly coddled and he could only imagine how much he was getting of that at home from May right now.

“Yeah, *no*, that wouldn’t go over well.”

Barnes shifted his weight. “He wouldn’t know I was there.”

“I don’t doubt it Buckaroo, but I don’t think it’s necessary. I was thinking more like I’ll get his AI to contact you if there’s trouble and I’m not available. Maybe some team training once the Compound is up and running?”

Barnes shrugged in an affirmative way. Such expressive shoulders.

“He’s one of us,” Steve piped up from where he’d been unusually quiet, “the team will look out for him.”

Something relaxed in Tony: he hadn’t realised he was quite so worried about Peter. Him being out of sight was definitely ramping up the anxiety. Maybe he could get some surveillance planted at May’s new apartment, just to make sure he is adjusting OK, not hiding injuries. No, no...personal

growth remember, not overbearing worrywart.

“Great, good.”

“Right, I guess I better go.” Steve stood up then: his eyes trailing Tony. “It’s good to see you looking so well.”

Tony shook the hand that was offered and was surprised when Steve leant down and gave him a hug. He could probably count on one hand the times they’d hugged each other; any physical touch would have been a nudge, or a hand on the shoulder. He returned it: giving his old friend’s shoulder a squeeze as he did.

“Take care of yourself, Tony,” Steve said lowly before pulling away.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

I'd planned to get up and edit this a final time before I posted it but then insomnia.

So here, it's 2.30am, have my insomnia-induced, achingly tired edited chapter. Go on, take it!

Peter

It had been a cold week and Peter bundled himself up against the wind as he walked up Bleecker Street. He was buzzing after school: the first fortnight back had been an adjustment, but now he was actually enjoying it. Mostly the part where he got to hang out with Ned and MJ every day; though he wasn't going to lie and say he hated the school-work. Once a nerd, always a nerd.

The two weeks he'd spent settling in at 'home' before that had been a lot harder. After his promise to May to try harder, he had done just that, trying to forget the tension of the first few days. They were all living in an unprecedented situation and emotions were high. So, he tried to get to know Kevin better – he'd brushed up on his small talk, instigated movie and board game nights. They just didn't gel – not yet at least. Though it had been a loooong month of trying. Kevin just didn't have that levity in him that Ben had. And God, Peter tried so hard not to compare him to Ben. Even Peter realised that was an impossible standard – 'immortalised dead uncle can do no wrong'. It's just that when you *did* compare them, they were just so chalk and cheese. Whereas from the outside they had similar values – hard working, community minded and family orientated, their approaches to those things were vastly different. Ben had found fun in life, light even in dark places but Kevin; Kevin was always so serious and grumpy – he didn't see the lighter side of life very easily.

Peter realised that certain things pleased Kevin so he went out of his way to do those things; making sure he was courteous and offering to help with the house and Alfie. He drew the line at asking permission to go out, but he was careful that he'd always squared it away with May beforehand, so that Kevin had no reason to be on him about it. Alfie was easy to get on with and though he could be annoying, he was always up for playing Legos, which Peter was of course happy to oblige with. And May, well, she was May. She was slowly becoming less clingy with him; there were no more night time visits, but he still caught her staring at him when she thought he didn't notice. He wished that they could spend more one on one time together – she was working a lot but he couldn't begrudge that – not when he was the unexpected mouth to feed, of course. When she *was* home, he gave way to Alfie – he was little and needed her attention; and Alfie's *need* overrode his *want*. Sure, she was a bit different from before; quieter maybe. But he figured the effect of loss and all the big changes she'd gone through in those five years all played a part in that.

Peter made his way up the steps and knocked briskly on the glass double doors. After a few moments, one of the doors opened to reveal a cloak.

“Cloakie! How’s it hanging?!” Peter high-fived the magical garment who then whisked all around him, tickling him and making him laugh.

Dr Strange appeared from a side room with a book in his hand. He sighed and scowled when he saw who it was. “Not again, Mr Parker.” He turned on his heel and back into the room he had come from. Peter jogged after him.

“Hey, Dr Strange, sir, how are you doing? It’s a breezy day out there. You should dress up warm if you’re going out.” Peter cringed at his own nonsense. He always babbled around Dr Strange – the man quite frankly scared him. Still he was here for a purpose.

Dr Strange was now at his desk. “I told you last time that it was the *last* time.” The sorcerer shot him a look.

“I know, I know, but then the move got pushed back.”

“I am not a taxi service...”

“I know sir, and I know your time is precious, and if there was any other way I wouldn’t impose on you...” Peter blurted out.

Dr Strange looked back at his desk and Peter felt like he was losing his chance.

“Please Dr Strange, it’s absolutely the last time, I promise. They are moving back Stateside this weekend.”

“Then you only have a few more days to wait.”

Peter really didn’t want to. He hadn’t been able to get away this weekend as both May and Kevin

had been at home and she had insisted they have a family weekend.

“Please, sir. Maybe I could do some work around here as payment. Dust and clean or something?” Peter went to pick up a dusty artefact on the shelf nearest to him.

“No, no,” Dr Strange came around the desk, his hand outstretched, “don’t touch anything!”

Peter retracted his hand before he could and looked at Dr Strange with what he hoped was his best puppy dog expression.

Dr Strange yelped as his cloak poked him in the ribs. He brushed down his clothes and gave Peter a pointed look. “You promise this is the last time?”

“Yes sir, thank you.”

Dr Strange sighed and then began doing his moving circle thingy. The portal opened up. “Come on then, Parker,” he tutted.

“This is so cool,” murmured Peter as he stepped through and they were suddenly in the palace in Wakanda.

“So, you say every time,” grumbled Dr Strange.

They were in the corridor outside Tony’s rooms and Peter knocked on the door. The door was opened by Tony himself.

“Kid!” He clapped his hand on Peter’s shoulder and gave it a squeeze.

Tony turned his eyes to Dr Strange. “Doctor, are you coming in to shoot the shit today?”

Dr Strange’s face hardened. “Some of us have more pressing matters. Though apparently your ward thinks I’m best used as transport.”

“He’s not my ward.”

“-I’m not his ward.”

Both Peter and Tony spoke at once, before looking at each other with a smile in their eyes.

“I don’t really care,” Dr Strange said wearily, “I’m told this is the last time I will be needed.”

“Yep, got the all clear to head home this weekend.”

Dr Strange’s face softened somewhat. “I’m glad to hear it.” He turned to Peter. “How long do you need?”

“I have to be home by 8.30pm, so back to the Sanctum by 7.30pm, if that’s OK, sir?” He wanted to make sure he was back before Kevin, or he’d have to be lectured about responsibilities again.

“I can take you directly home. See you at 8.30pm.” Dr Strange rolled his eyes before giving Tony a tight nod. “Stark.”

“Doctor.” Tony gave him a nod, the corners of his mouth twitching.

With a whirl of his hands, he was gone again.

Peter was encapsulated by Tony’s arm around his shoulder and brought further into the beautiful apartment. The tall windows showed the backdrop of the Golden City – it was late evening here and all the lights of the metropolis twinkled below them.

“You know, I think you might be starting to grow on him.”

Peter burst out a laugh. “Er, no. I’m pretty sure he hates me.”

“Ha! Who else would be able to convince him to bring you here every week for the last month? He doesn’t strike me as someone who does favours readily.” Tony poured some drinks for them. “Did I ever say how proud I was of you coming up with that idea and getting the Wizard to go along with it?”

Peter warmed at his praise, but then thought about how he had gotten down on his knees and begged the man the first time.

“It was my only way to get to visit and, well, dignity has never been all that important to me, so…”

Tony grinned. “Yeah, we all remember the onesie.”

“Hey!” Peter said, partly offended.

Tony handed him a drink and Peter gulped it down. “Thanks.”

Peter watched as Tony suddenly winced and gripped his arm. This happened from time to time, but it didn’t stop Peter jumping up and guiding him to the sofa behind.

“I’m fine kid,” Tony said relaxing as the pain must have relented.

“Should I call the Doctor?” Peter looked around the room for a phone.

“No, I just had a session on the ‘machine of doom’.” Tony said, gesturing to a small machine in the corner. It was something Shuri had designed which sent electrical impulses through Tony’s arm to help stimulate the new nerves. He could move his arm, but it wasn’t as responsive yet. “It always acts up for a bit after that.”

“Maybe I could go and ask Shuri – see if we can tweak the machine.” Peter had enjoyed a few visits to Shuri’s lab the last few times he came. Tony had been ‘allowed’ by Pepper to attend the last one. He could honestly spend all day there; her technology was insane.

“You are out of luck, Romeo, your girlfriend is at an official ceremony tonight.” Tony said with a playful look in his eyes.

“Shuri is not my girlfriend,” Peter felt his cheeks heat.

“No, of course not, you only have eyes for MJ, right?” Tony smirked.

Peter knew now that his cheeks would be burning red.

“Ow!” Tony said as Peter punched him in the good arm. He rubbed the spot he’d hit. “I’m recovering over here you know.”

Peter sat back with a grin. “Where’s Pepper?”

Tony yawned. “She’s working next door on the relief effort.”

Peter nodded. He knew how much Stark Industries had been instrumental in getting people shelter in the first chaotic weeks.

“Morgan is going to be gutted that she didn’t get to see you again.”

Peter made a scared face. “Maybe *not* tell her that I came when she was asleep. I’m not sure I can take another cold shoulder.” Morgan had refused to speak to him for the first 15 minutes of his video call with the Stark family on Saturday.

Tony chuckled. “Lie to my child, huh? She’s forgiven you; she just got used to seeing you at the weekends, that’s all. How was your family weekend anyway?”

“We took Alfie to the Zoo, which he loved. Though I think he was disappointed as he thought there might be dinosaurs.” Peter made a funny face and Tony smiled. He didn’t need to mention how, after May had left for work, Kevin had complained at him for ages about their bills -*you eat too much* - before stomping off.

“Morgan has insisted on a play date with the young man when we get back.” Morgan and Alfie had discovered each other when Peter was video chatting.

“I’m sure I can arrange that with May.” She’d been pretty tired lately; he was sure an afternoon without Alfie would be welcome.

“How is it being back at school?”

Peter didn’t mind that obligatory old person question this time. “Weird as hell. Don’t know half the people there. But I’ve got Ned and MJ, so I’m really lucky.”

Tony hummed a response as he sat back against the plump cushions.

“Funny thing happened. The school had an anonymous benefactor donate a new Starkbook to every kid who’d been Snapped.” Peter raised an eyebrow at him.

“Wow, you don’t say?”

Peter held his gaze. Tony held it back.

“I think it is great what you did, but why didn’t you just tell me you were going to do that? Why be secretive?”

“I have no idea what you are talking about.”

“Mine came loaded with Karen on it, Mr Stark.” Peter deadpanned.

Tony let out a laugh. “I’ve never been good at anonymity.”

Peter rolled his eyes.

“Happy said you had to be strong armed into taking the phone; if I tried to give you a laptop- even though I know you need it for school – you would have refused.”

Peter ignored that inconvenient truth. “So you bought laptops for all those kids?! You are so... extra!”

“Again, this is not your first time meeting me, kid. Keep up.” Tony bared his teeth in a grin. “You didn’t mind my being extra when I devised all those different web shooters combinations.”

“You realise that I haven’t used more than ten different ones, right?”

“Haven’t used more than ten *yet*, you mean?”

Peter barked out a laugh.

“So, speaking of; you been spinning any webs this week?”

Peter shook his head. “May is still vetoing it. It’s driving me mad. There is so much I could be helping with. I can literally hear it out my window.” Peter sighed. The whole city was still in chaos after the reverse snap and that meant a huge spike in crime. “I’m thinking I might just slip out one night when she is working...”

“Peter...” Tony’s voice held a light warning.

“She won’t even know. It’s important. I need to be playing my part.”

“You already did. Now enjoy being a kid, at least for a bit.”

Peter hated this kid argument. He hadn’t been a kid since he was bitten by that spider; not since Ben.

“Really, if you were me, you would just *not* do what you know you can do to help people?”

Peter saw Tony falter.

“No, but I was an idiot at your age so I would probably just have used the suit to get chicks.”

Peter made a face.

“Seriously though, it’s hard to explain but those of us that lost people, we kinda feel this overwhelming need to keep you as safe as possible.” Peter started to open his mouth to counter, but Tony put his hand up to stop him. “Even if they are Superheroes.”

Peter sighed and looked out over the city again. He knew Tony was sympathetic to him – knew that he felt the urge to help people; even if he pretended to be uncaring. Maybe it was worth a try to appeal to that sentiment in him?

“Maybe, *you* could talk to May about it?” Peter began, noting Tony’s eyebrow raise. “She might listen to you.”

“We already discussed it last week.”

They had done what? Peter must have shown his shock as Tony continued.

“Worlds collide, huh?!”

“Why were you talking about me, about Spider-man?” For some reason he didn’t like the idea of the two of them conspiring behind his back, potentially against him. It reminded him of when Ben was alive; two against one. Like having two parents again. He didn’t have time to process that thought before Tony spoke again.

“May wanted my opinion. Apparently you were dropping some oh so subtle hints. What did she say? Oh yeah; “*Isn’t the crime rate just terrible at the moment?*”, “*The police must be really struggling*’.” Tony laughed and Peter remembered that Kevin had been most vocal about that comment: though not more so than when Peter brought up Spider-man and Kevin was livid, saying they didn’t need the help of ‘*reckless vigilantes*.’

“Well, um, what did you say?”

“I told her the truth. That I’d worry about you every time you went out too.”

Peter sat back aghast.

“And then I said that you were very capable and that the suit would make sure you didn’t die in an alley somewhere...”

“Mr Stark!” Peter groaned which earned him a laugh from the older man.

There was a slight pause.

“Look kid, if you are serious about wanting to do this, then stop dropping hints. I think you should just talk to her yourself and state your case.” Tony shrugged. “You never know, it might work. But no sneaking out. And I’ll know if you do.”

“This suit still has a training wheels protocol, doesn’t it?” Peter sighed. “I thought I’d earned them being taken off.”

“They aren’t as tight as the other one. Like a cross between your first suit and the Iron Spider. Think of it like a toddler training suit.”

Peter flung a pillow at Tony which he let hit him straight in the face. Tony thumped back against the sofa, laughing as he pulled it off of his face.

Peter glowed. He was annoyed by the restrictions from May and Tony but deep down he felt cared for.

“You know, Shuri said I could access the lab any time I liked...” Tony gave him a questioning look.

Peter sat up and answered the question that was surely part of that statement. “Yes!”

Tony laughed again and threw the pillow back at him.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Hello! So this is a looong one. I probably could have split it up but ho hum!

Let me know what you think the the comments - they are my lifeblood!

Tony

The landing was smoother than anything Tony had achieved on the Quinjet and he reminded himself that he was going to want to be collaborating with Shuri a lot more going forward. He made his way down the steps after Morgan and Pepper; the wind lapping his hair. As his feet stepped on solid ground, he felt a jolt of something inside him. Was it some sort of patriotism, this feeling of being so happy to be home? He'd never really been someone overly tied to serving his 'country'. Humanity yes, his country was secondary, really. He decided that he was looking forward to getting some normality back. Whatever that meant.

Pepper had her car here and with some help from the ground staff, they loaded it up and headed the short distance to the cabin. Wakanda was beautiful but there was something calming to see the familiar countryside sweeping past them: along with the welcome lack of humidity. As they pulled up to the cabin, Tony could see Happy's car out front. He'd been busy preparing the place for them to come home to and it would be good to see his old friend. Poor sap had been all over the place the last few weeks at Pepper's behest. Mental note: give that man a raise and maybe a new title – he likes those. '*Director of Pepper's Bidding*' perhaps?

Morgan held his good hand as they jogged up the steps onto the covered veranda; the lake glistening in front of them. Morgan was pulling at him, eager to get inside to her toys no doubt.

He opened and the door and:

“SURPRISE!”

Peter, with a big grin on his face, was stood beneath a huge homemade sign that said, “*Welcome Home!!*”

Morgan rushed over to him before Tony could move from the spot.

“Peter!” Pepper’s voice was filled with delight and she moved to him to give Peter a squeeze before her phone trilled and she drifted off to the other room.

Tony unfroze. “I thought you said that you couldn’t come up this weekend!”

Peter smiled from one side of his mouth as he hugged Morgan, and then after putting her down, he rubbed his head awkwardly. “I just had the idea to surprise you and I checked with Happy and he thought it might be OK, so I know you must be tired but, I-I hope it was OK that I came, but I can totally just go...”

A gush of love rushed over him as he strode over and enveloped the kid in a big hug, stopping his stammering. Peter hugged him back tightly. *This Kid.*

It felt totally natural to be tactile with Peter now: four years of being a parent had softened him. Before, the kid made it obvious that he welcomed Tony’s affection, but he’d been too guarded to let him in completely, despite their blossoming relationship after the Vulture debacle.

In the years following the Snap, he’d thought about that a lot – why he had tried to hide what he felt for the kid? Why he had feared letting him close? He’d not wanted to have the kid get attached to him – he wasn’t good at personal relationships, never had been, he didn’t want to end up hurting Peter, which had felt inevitable. But after it was too late he regretted not fully showing the kid how he felt: it *haunted* him. He could only tolerate a few photos around the house as it was too painful. It was the depth of his pain that had made him realise how much he cared for Peter. Pepper had been right – wasn’t she always - that he wouldn’t have rested knowing that he hadn’t at least tried to get Peter, and everyone else, back.

Tony pulled away and saw the glow of pink in his cheeks.

“This place is amazing! So quiet – like how do you cope with that after the city?” Peter stepped towards the window as he looked around. “And the lake is like, right there. Can you swim in it?”

Tony smiled at his enthusiasm. “Yeah, but it might be a bit cold right now.”

He looked slightly disappointed. Morgan tugged on his hand.

“Come see my room...”

Peter let himself be pulled by the hand and up the stairs as Happy walked into the room, an apron wrapped around his waist, which looked odd on top of his ever-present suit.

“Thinking of a new career, Hap?” Tony couldn’t resist and barely hid his smirk as Happy scrambled to whip it off.

“We made some cookies for Morgan.” Happy’s voice was indignant; his love for Morgan was obvious.

“You had a stowaway Spider I see?”

Uncertainty flashed over Happy’s face. “Look, he got the idea of surprising you guys and then he kept calling me and calling me until I gave in, an-.”

“-Hap. It was great.”

The doubt left the man’s face and his body relaxed. “His Aunt said that she’ll come and get him tomorrow as they are off visiting her in-laws this weekend anyway.”

The sound of feet running around and then down the stairs came.

“Uncle Happy!” Morgan ran over and Happy picked her up. “I think I smell something chocolate.”

“Oh really?” Happy said, giving her a wide smile, and starting towards the kitchen with her.

“Er, Happy, you gonna stop stealing my kid and get the bags?” Tony said, pointing a thumb over his shoulder.

“I’ll get them, Mr Stark,” Peter disappeared out the door.

“Maybe he should have your job?” Tony teased.

“I’m not sure I’d want Peter behind the wheel of a car...” Happy said as he strolled off with Morgan. And for some reason Tony had to agree; the idea of Peter behind the wheel of a car was terrifying...

Tony felt the cool nip of the spring air as he stepped out onto the covered verandah. Peter was curled up on the sofa, his legs tucked under him, papers to one side and a folder on his lap. Tony almost did a double take seeing him here: a place that had only ever been his post -Blip life. *Life after Peter*. It was jarring somehow to see him here now; Tony had never considered that he’d ever set foot here. Peter had been dead; alive only in memories and the nightmares that plagued him afterwards.

Peter looked up at him then; brown eyes sparkling as the light hit them.

“Hey, I’m almost done. Give me a minute.”

“Take your time, kid.”

Tony sat at the other end of the sofa, his back pressed into the corner so he could both look out over the water and at Peter.

Hell, it was good to have him back. Tony took in his features now; dark, wavy hair curling in parts; his jaw rolling back and forth as he chewed the end of his pen in thought. His arms and legs stuck out at sharp angles to his trim body. He could look to gain a bit of weight but then again that was always the case. Peter was so much the same, when everything was so different. If he was still on those strong drugs, Tony might have thought he was hallucinating.

“You’re doing that thing again...”

Tony snapped his eyes up from where they had been shamelessly roaming the kid. Brown eyes met his now.

“Huh?”

“You’re doing that thing May does. Staring at me when she thinks I won’t notice.” Peter’s mouth turned into a soft, almost indulgent smile.

Tony almost made a joke but then decided on sincerity. “Yep. Don’t much feel like apologising though.”

Peter grunted out a laugh. “May said something similar. Though she was creepier – I’d wake up and find her just sitting there.”

“I’ll try to draw the line there then,” Tony said, with half a smile. “Besides, Fri could just send me a video link so I don’t have to get out of bed.”

The pencil flew in his direction; plunking off his chest and into his lap. “Way to double down on the creepy, Mr Stark.”

Tony picked up the pencil and scooted a bit closer to hand it back.

“What are you working on anyway?”

“All of us who Snapped are having to take an extra class to catch up on what we missed while we are gone.” Peter rolled his eyes.

“Huh? That is not a bad idea.” Tony mused. “World events and all that?”

“Yeah,” Peter went back to chewing the end of his pencil as he glanced back down at his papers.

“You got questions? Hit me up.”

Peter turned abruptly then, in a way that reminded Tony of how smoothly his own body had worked when he was that age and made him feel envy. Youth is so wasted on the young. Peter settled his crisscrossed legs so that he was facing Tony more: a serious look on his face.

“I wanted to get an update on all the Avengers stuff.”

“What happened while you were gone?”

“Well, that too, but more like, what is happening now? I guess now that Thor is off in space for a while and Cap is, well, retired.”

Tony’s chest tightened a little; he’d been pretty gobsmacked when he’d heard what Steve had done. Didn’t think he had it in him. Still he was glad that Steve had done something for himself; having a life with the woman he loved that he’d wanted all those years ago. Steve had made it clear he didn’t want to divvy out the details of the life he’d lived and, man, that was a hard itch not to scratch for Tony. But the man had spent so much of his life in the public eye, Tony had to respect his privacy. That, and the fact that they’d decided that the use of time travel should not been made privy to the public, meant Steve would get to live out his years incognito. Tony’s few years of near anonymity living out in the cabin had shown him the value of that.

Tony watched Peter shift his weight and look off to the left before he continued, this time in a gentler tone: “And of course Vision and Ms Romanoff...”

Nat. Vision’s loss had settled around him over the last five years but Nat’s was still a fresh wound. They’d had a complicated relationship not exactly built on truth, but the connection they grew was solid. She left a big gap in the team, and in his heart.

“Sorry, I shouldn’t have brought this up right now. You lost your friends and I...I should know better...” Peter rushed out.

Tony stopped him with a hand on his knee.

“It’s ok, kid. I don’t mind. I sure do miss them,” Tony said heavily, the weight of it like a warm ball sitting in his chest. His statement was simple, but true. “I never thought I’d miss Vision’s

constant hovering, or playing verbal gymnastics with Nat just trying to figure out if she ate the last bagel or not.” He smiled, but it felt too stretched on his skin.

He felt warm fingers encase his and he looked up into Peter’s gentle face. He felt a spike of guilt at sharing this with the teenager but then he remembered; Peter knew grief. As much as Tony wished he’d be able to go back in time and shield the kid from it, his exposure to it played a part in who he was today; and Tony wasn’t sure he wanted to change Peter at all.

“Nat sacrificed herself. I just wish there was a way of her knowing that her loss wasn’t in vain. That she was the reason we’re all back together.”

Peter didn’t say anything but hummed a reassurance. Tony looked out over the lake as emotion poured through him: making his arms and legs feel weighted. He looked at the stars; the moon bright and visible on this clear night. The silence wasn’t heavy between them: Tony grounded by the weight of Peter’s hand in his.

After a few moments, Peter spoke: “Wow, it’s so much clearer out here than at the Compound – the stars are so much more defined.”

Tony remembered nights when Peter would drag him to the Compound roof and they would seek out the constellations. Peter always so excited at picking out the right ones.

“Still in awe even after you’ve travelled through them and been on another planet?”

Peter shrugged. “I was a little bit too preoccupied with keeping my shit together to take in the view, Mr Stark.”

Tony barked out a laugh. “Ha, yeah.”

It felt like a lifetime ago; travelling back with Nebula, feeling himself slowly dying, let alone what had happened on Titan; he tried not to think about it if he could. Come to think of it, he hadn’t had a nightmare about that since the Battle. In fact, discounting drug induced fever dreams, he hadn’t had any nightmares at all.

“Well, I asked about the Avengers, cos you know if you need me now, for more of that...bigger...stuff then, I’m ready.”

Tony felt his heart start to beat faster. *No, no, no.* That was the last thing he wanted. Spider-man was one thing, but he couldn't bear to think of the kid messed up in Avengers level stuff. No, he wanted bubble wrap and a lockable room for the kid.

“What happened to the friendly neighbourhood Spider-man?”

“I can do both,” Peter said, firmly.

He looked at the kid now: face so earnest and his jaw set in the way it did he he felt righteous about something. Tony couldn't really argue that Peter wasn't physically up to the challenge; wasn't worthy. He stilled his panic and tried something more like reason.

“You can't even get Aunt Hottie to agree to that: I doubt she's gonna sign off on the big gun stuff.” Peter opened his mouth to say something but Tony didn't let him. “But, kid, if something big was going down, of course we'd call you. I made you a member of the team because you deserve to be one. However, I'm hoping we won't need you. It may seem like we are short staffed but we aren't – Sam, Barnes, Wanda, Bruce and Rhodey are around. When you want to be a full time Avenger, they'd welcome you with open arms. Right now, just focus on being a teenager - when you are legal you can decide. After MIT of course...”

Peter gave him a wry smile. “MIT...of course. You know, I hear Stanford has some excellent courses.”

Tony cuffed him around the back of the head before pulling him closer so his back nestled against Tony's chest. “Shut up and look at the stars, kid.”

He took in a breath as they both looked up into the sky. After a few moments of silence, the Spiderling broke the silence.

“One more question?” Peter looked up at him from under his lashes.

Tony tilted his head.

“Will you tell me how you figured time travel out?” Peter's eyes were wide with wonder. Of

course he'd want to know. Pete got high off science.

“Since I know you are good at keeping secrets...wait, how many people know your secret identity now? Half of school?”

Peter rolled his eyes. “Hardly.”

Tony chuckled. “Well, it all started when Ant-man showed up...”

Peter

Peter tried to get comfortable in the little Wendy house; his back pressing against the roof as he sat cross-legged in front of the tiny table. He readjusted his weight as he started to get cramp in one leg and knocked into the table leg, knocking a teddy bear wearing a top hat off its chair.

“Careful, you will spill the tea.” Morgan said, a very serious expression on her face, as Peter replaced the bear.

“Sorry Morgs,” he said, trying to keep a straight face. “I’m just a bit squished.”

“OK, well tomorrow we can play at the big table.”

“I won’t be here tomorrow; I’m leaving later,” he said gently.

Peter saw her eyes drop before they returned to his with a slightly angry glint. “But I want you to stay!”

Peter wanted to stay too. The weekend had been so much fun. He could really relax and be himself; not worried about showing his powers or annoying Kevin. He'd played with Morgan during the day while Tony napped– not minding being bossed around by her. When Pepper had 'rescued' him, he and Tony had gone fishing – a first time for him. In the evening, Tony started to explain how they had figured out the time travel that had made his return possible. It was mind blowing and he wasn't ashamed to say that he didn't completely get it. He made a whole list of follow questions that night when he was meant to be asleep.

"I do too. But I have to go back... to my family." The word home wouldn't roll off his tongue. Kevin's apartment wasn't home.

"But Daddy always said that you were family too, so you should stay here."

Morgan continued to pour the 'tea' oblivious to the increase in Peter's heart rate. His throat felt full – did Tony really think of him like that? Like a member of the family?

"Here you go Peter," Morgan handed him the tiny cup and carried on oblivious to the emotional rollercoaster her words had just sent him on. "Sugar?"

Peter was just having some imaginary sugar added to his cup when the flap of the tent opened.

"Pete, your A...oh.." Tony smirked whilst whipping out his phone to take a photo of the scene in front of him. Peter Parker cramped in a tiny wendy house, next to a bear in a top hat, holding a cup of tea with his pinky flared out.

"This is so going on social media," Tony grinned, backing away.

"Wait, what? No!" Peter tried to get up, forgetting his legs were crossed and fell awkwardly, his weight causing the flimsy tent to fall over.

"Hey!" Morgan protested.

Peter managed to disentangle himself and looked over to see Tony bent over crying in almost silent laughter. He pulled in a breath.

“Oh my God, that one too, that was priceless.” He fiddled with the phone in his hand. “There, sent to the team chat.”

“You didn’t?! Give me the phone!” Peter ran towards Tony who, barely breathing through the laughter, started to run away from him. Peter was almost on him when Tony slipped on the uneven ground, landing on his side. Peter kneeled over him, worried for a moment if he was alright but as he rolled him over he was met with Tony’s face, creased with joy and tears on his cheeks now.

“That just leaves Ted and, what was it... TJ?” Tony pretended not to know.

Peter leapt for the phone, but Tony rolled away with it outstretched. Peter jumped on his back - embarrassment now just replaced with thrill. He hadn’t rough housed with anyone since Ben and he’d forgotten how fun it was. Before he could get the phone off a still uncontrollably laughing Tony, Morgan jumped in screaming; “Tickle fight!”

Tony starting howling with laughter and trying to wriggle away from their fingers with Morgan tickling under his chin and Peter pinning him down and going for the ribs.

“What on earth is going on?!” Pepper’s amused voice carried over and they all stopped and looked up at her at the same time.

Next to Pepper stood Aunt May -who shared the same bemused expression as Pepper. A nervous looking Alfie was held by Kevin, who had a forced smile on his face.

Peter got up quickly and reached out a hand for Tony who took it with a big grin, hoisting himself up and dusting down his jeans that probably cost more than Kevin’s car.

“They were terrorising me; what can I say.” Tony said with a big grin, stepping towards May and leaning in to give her a brief kiss on the cheek. “It’s lovely to see you, May darling.”

“You too, Tony. You look...pretty good.” May looked surprised.

There was some residual scarring snaking up Tony’s neck but thanks to Dr Cho’s Cradle, it wasn’t too bad. The most evident change was his right arm in the sling.

“Yeah, I’m not doing too bad.” He held up his sling. “Got some rehab to do on the arm but otherwise...I got very lucky.”

Peter didn’t like the nonchalant way that Tony brushed off what had happened. He had been there and seen it. Tony had snapped knowing that it should have killed him. He *had* been dead. It was odd to see Tony downplay his achievements – normally he tooted his own horn all the time.

“Nice to see you againm Mr Hayes,” Tony continued. Peter hadn’t realised that they had previously met. He mentally added it to his long list of things that happened when he wasn’t here.

“You too, Mr Stark. Beautiful place you have here,” Kevin said, nodding at him.

“How are you Mr Alfred?” Tony had spoken to Alfie when they had been video-chatting.

Alfie hid his face in his father’s neck.

“Hey Morgan, do you want to show Alfie your play tent?” Pepper asked.

“Peter broke it!” Morgan said throwing her hands up in a truly exasperated expression.

“You did what?” said Kevin, looking at him with a tilt of the head.

“Um, no, it’s not broken, Morg, I can sort it out.” Peter didn’t look at Kevin but at Morgan.

Morgan took his hand.

“You want to come and see Alfie?” Peter held out his hand to him and he reached for it, forcing Kevin to put him down.

Peter took the two four-year olds off towards the little play area; Morgan babbled away pointing out things. Alfie still looked a little unsure but the grip on his hand had loosened somewhat. He

knew what would make him relax more.

“Hey Alfie, you’re it!” he tapped him lightly on the shoulder and Alfie’s face beamed. The kid loved chasing and being chased.

“Morgan watch out! Alfie is ‘it,’” Peter saw her face morph into excitement too and they both started ducking and diving as Alfie started to chase them. He got Morgan first and then she went after him and got him back again quite quickly but then shouted, “Team up!” and the both of them turned on him. He dodged them for a minute or two, but not too long that they would get frustrated, before allowing himself to get caught.

“My turn!” he said, giving them what he hoped was his best evil grin, and they both squealed and scattered. He caught Morgan first and putting her giggling form under his armpit, raced with her there to grab Alfie. Their peals of laughter made his chest feel warm. They squealed again as he ran to the water’s edge and pretended to throw them in. He heard a low chuckle, which he made out to be Tony’s, coming from the direction of the cabin’s verandah where the parents were sat having tea.

Morgan led Alfie back towards the upturned tent and Peter fixed it, which didn’t entail much other than straightening it up and repositioning a few of the plastic rods. He went to step inside after Alfie, but Morgan held her hand up in almost an exact replica of her father’s Iron Man pose.

“No, you might break it again.”

Peter felt a little put out for half a second before he remembered he’d be happier not to have to squash in there again.

“Okay,” he shoved his hands in his pockets.

“Do you want a drink Peter?” Pepper’s voice called.

He was pretty thirsty after running around after the kids – he jogged up to the cabin and onto the verandah. There were available seats next to Tony or Kevin. It was a no brainer and he slid into the chair closest to his mentor.

“Thanks,” he said as Pepper passed him a glass of cold lemonade, which he quickly drained.

“Must hurt to be left out by the cool kids here, and at school, Parker,” Tony’s snarky remark came with a grin.

“Yeah, I’m sure they were all lining up to be your friends when your scrawny ass started MIT...” Peter said, crunching a piece of ice and smiling serenely at him.

“Peter, I don’t think you’re being very respectful to Mr Stark,” Kevin looked crossly at him and Peter found himself fixing his eyes to the floor.

“Oh no, Mr Hayes, they’re always teasing each other, Pepper said, cooling any tension. “I personally always enjoy seeing Tony get a taste of his own medicine. “

May laughed and the tension in Peter unfurled slightly.

“Speaking of which, there was something I wanted to put to you, kid,” Tony said, shifting his weight.

“Yeah?” Peter said, still feeling a few nerves.

“Now we’re back Stateside, I’m going to be coming into the city a few times a week for rehab and what not. I was wondering how you felt about starting up the internship again. Miss Potts has allowed me to return to the lab and I could use your assistance, in a strictly junior capacity, one level up from the robots of course.” Tony swirled his drink whilst looking at Peter.

The idea of being back in the lab – back to some sort of normality – felt like a heady concoction.

“T-that would be amazing!” Peter couldn’t keep what he was sure must be a dopey grin off his face. “When can we start?”

“It will have to depend on how his grades are at school,” Kevin piped up and everyone looked at him like he was mad.

“Peter’s always been a good student. I can’t foresee there being an issue with that hon,” May said smiling gently, resting her hand on his arm.

“Oh Tony,” Pepper said reaching for his arm also. “I’m sure Peter would love to see what you’ve accomplished over at the TPF.”

“Oh yes,” said May, smiling warmly.

“The TPF?” Peter asked, looking between Tony and Pepper. Tony was looking down and off to the side.

“Oh, I thought you...well, after the snap, we, well Tony, wanted to do something to help all the displaced children. So, he set up the TPF,” her voice softened, “The Parker Foundation.”

Peter stopped dead still; his heart rate speeding up. There was no way the name was a coincidence. His eyes flicked to Tony who took a drink from his glass without looking up.

“Wow, that sounds amazing.” Peter heard himself utter while the thoughts in his head raced. Why would Tony name it after someone like him? There had been a million other, more worthy, candidates surely.

Pepper carried on. “Yes, of course at SI we had a variety of projects running to try to help. It was a very difficult time for everyone in the world.”

There was a quiet nod and Peter got a real sense of how hard it must have been to carry on in a world so entangled with grief.

“Now, we are utilising the TPF to help reconnect the returned parents with their kids – help them with necessities, housing etc.” Pepper explained.

“I think it’s wonderful that you’re using those projects now to help those who’ve returned,” May said, “I just referred a lady to one of them yesterday.”

“Well, when you have the power to help, you really should,” Tony said, looking up and catching

Peter's eyes briefly.

Peter felt like someone had hammered into him. He took a few moments quietly controlling his breathing while the conversation moved on around him.

“Peter?”

May's voice brought him out of himself. “Huh?”

“I said, we're going to have to head off shortly.” She gave him a warm look.

“Oh right, I'll go and get my stuff.”

His legs moved him upstairs to the room he'd been sleeping in. He sat down on the bed and whipped out his phone, typing 'The Parker Foundation' into the search bar. Thousands of hits came up and he scrolled through a few of the older ones— reading bits of information. The foundation had given resources to the State to help reunite orphaned children with extended family members and where not possible, giving CPS more funding to help kids into good foster homes. They also provided unlimited counselling and psychological therapies to help those children overcome the trauma they had endured. He came to a news video and pressed play. A reporter came on screen.

“Today we have witnessed a press conference by the now rarely spotted billionaire and philanthropist Tony Stark, unveiling his newest charitable enterprise in the wake of the terrible vanishing of half of the world's population. He was answering questions about The Parker Foundation, a charity dedicated to helping the children who were orphaned as a result of the Snap.”

The clip changed to a very different looking Tony stood at a podium; his clothes hanging off of him and the bags under his eyes visible. Tony points in a direction of a middle-aged reporter.

“Mr Stark, what can you tell us about your motivation behind this particular organisation and the origin of its name?”

A flash of pain fleetingly went over his features before he spoke:

“The project is named after an, um, intern I had. A really, *good*, intern who believed that we should do everything in our power to help people - starting with the little guy. And I can do something to help, so I should.” A haunted look came onto Tony’s face before he blinked it away. “And that is what this is; helping those kids who, through no fault of their own, have been denied the basic privilege of parents.” Tony seems to falter then, gripping the edge of the podium. “No more questions.”

Peter paused the video before the reporter started talking again.

Looking after the little guy. That was what they’d talked about when they’d first met. Tony had remembered that? Peter’s throat felt so tight and he was fighting the tears in his eyes, but he didn’t really know why they were there.

Tony

The cubes clinked against his teeth as he drank down the sweet lemonade that Pepper had brought out. He kept half an ear on the conversation whilst he watched the doorway for Peter’s return. He’d watched Peter taking in the information about the Foundation and knew him well enough that he was thinking hard about it and feeling something that he wasn’t outwardly expressing. He tried to focus on what his guests were saying; May was talking about the increase in hospital admissions since the reversal and Kevin had talked about how flat out the Police were dealing with the sudden influx. But he kept glancing over to the doorway.

A slight squeeze of Pepper’s foot against his showed him that he was not as good at multitasking as he thought he was. He paid a bit more attention to the conversation, nodding along. He’d met Kevin once before – May had brought him as a guest to their wedding. He seemed nice enough but not someone who he thought a firecracker like May would end up with. He was a little bit too serious. Maybe that was what being Police Officer did to you. Maybe in her grief May needed someone to guide her; a safe pair of hands.

He watched this man for a minute as he listened to Pepper talking about some of the projects SI were working on. Kevin had May’s hand in his; his thumb stroking it. There hadn’t seemed much warmth between him and Peter, but Tony guessed it was still early days. He had yet to meet anyone that was immune to Parker’s nerdy charms and he doubted this guy would end up any different. Hell, Peter had only spent less than a fortnight around the other Avengers at the hospital and they were always asking him how the kid was when they called to check up on his health. Tony was almost offended. Scrap that; he wasn’t. If anything it showed him that his attachment to

the kid wasn't an anomaly.

He felt Pepper's shoes squeeze him again and a quick look at her told him he'd misinterpreted her earlier. He stood up and pointed to the doorway as he moved; "I'll just check that the kid stole the good cutlery."

Pepper caught his eye and he knew he'd gotten it right this time. She'd noticed the change in Peter too. He added to the long list of reasons why he loved her as he jogged up the stairs. As he got closer to the bedroom door, he heard himself speaking – a tinny quality to it - and knew instantly what Peter was up to.

He heard the sound stop and gently pushed the bedroom door open. Peter didn't raise his head, but Tony could see his Adam's apple rise and fall quickly. Tony sat down next to him on the bed and glanced down at the phone in his hand which confirmed that he had indeed been watching the video of The Parker Foundation press conference.

"Doing a bit of light research there, kid?" Tony said, trying to ease the tension.

Peter cleared his throat. "I was just looking it up. It...it was, *is*, a wonderful thing you did."

"You look a little freaked out," Tony said, getting a bit freaked out himself that the kid wasn't looking at him.

"I'm...not."

"You hide it well..." Tony quipped and that earned him a smile, if still not a direct look. "It doesn't have to be a big deal. It was just something I wanted to do."

The kid looked at him then and there are so many emotions in his wet eyes that it sent a jolt through Tony.

"Thank you," Peter's voice cracks slightly but he carries on, "for looking out for the *real* little guys. If I hadn't been lucky and had Ben and then May...I...I would have been in foster care...I don't know where I would have ended up. I wouldn't be who I am and..."

Tony stayed silent as he watched the kid compose himself and take a shuddering breath.

“It *is* a big deal. The foundation must have made a big difference to a lot of kids and now it will help them reunite. I don’t think it deserves my name, Mr Stark, but I’m honoured. Thank you.”

Peter put his arms around Tony tightly and Tony returned it, equal force. His instinct was to say something – I mean what teenager who loses his parents and Uncle and still has the force of mind to consider himself *lucky*. He wanted to tell him that it was his honour to name it after Peter and that if May hadn’t gone along with it, he still would have done it.

He wanted to tell him that he’d walked out of the press conference and got drunker than he had ever been in his life, and that was saying something. Anything not to remember when he had first met this extraordinary kid who took so much of the world on his shoulders. A kid who just wanted to give back to his community.

In truth, The Parker Foundation had saved him – it had given him purpose and passion again when he had been so low after Thanos’ victory. It had kept him going until Morgan appeared and then he’d been given this second chance – a chance to do some right in the world in a small way. But Tony said nothing and stayed anchored to the kid, trying not to match the halted breaths of Peter as he tried not to cry.

Peter pulled away first; wiping his eyes swiftly with his palms, and avoiding eye contact again. “Sorry, Mr Stark.”

“There are two things wrong with that short sentence that I gotta address,” Tony said, which made the kid look up at him from under his eyebrows. “First, nothing to be sorry for. Second, do you think you might want to call me Tony from now on?”

Peter’s eyes shined for a moment and then were clouded with doubt.

“I don’t know Mr St-“ A smile floated on his lips. “I...”

“I think we are there, Underoos.”

The smile solidified.

“I’ll try.”

Peter grabbed his bag and they made their way downstairs to where the Hayes’ and Pepper were still sat.

“Sorry, but we have to make a move,” said May, the look on her face reluctant. Tony knew there was a mutual appreciation between Pepper and May and that had everything not happened, their friendship would have blossomed.

Being around May had been too raw for him afterwards. He’d been to see her; told her how he had been with Peter to his last moment and... that had not been a good night. So other than attending their wedding, they hadn’t met up, though he knew Pepper spoke to her, especially when they had the little ones a few months apart. When they’d moved to the cabin, Happy had kept tabs on her; his former bodyguard had a soft spot for her, so hadn’t been hard to convince.

“Peter, would you go and get Alfie and say your goodbyes to Morgan?” May asked.

Peter nodded and jogged off in that direction.

“Would you mind if I used your bathroom?” Kevin asked, standing up.

“Follow me,” said Pepper with a smile.

For a moment, Tony and May both observed, in companionable silence, Peter reach the kids who decided another round of chase was in order.

“Tony,” May’s hand touched him on the arm as she spoke, and he looked over to see her eyes filled with emotion. She slid her hand into his and he turned to her in surprise. “Thank you. He told me a little of what you all did to get them back, and then what you did on the battlefield, risking yourself...” She gripped his hand. “Thank you.”

A lot of people had said that to him since and he had brushed it off, but this one felt like it would stick.

He squeezed her hand back. "It's good to have him back."

May took her hand away to wipe her eyes.

"Heads up, he might be thinking about having a conversation with you about his other extracurricular activities soon."

May sighed. "I know. You know I never approved of it all before, putting himself in harm's way, but I know it's a part of who he is. It's just hard to let go of him now I have him back. I keep thinking he is going to disappear on me again."

Tony's heart beat faster as he remembered the feeling of holding him as he disintegrated.

"I told him I'll support whatever you decide," Tony followed.

She raised an eyebrow at him. "That doesn't sound like the Tony Stark I knew."

Tony smiled with a shrug. "I guess I'm Tony Stark 2.0 now."

May's look went back out to the kids who were living their best life chasing Peter round the trees.

"How has he been, when he is with you?" May wrapped her arms around herself.

"Eats like it's going out of fashion. Wants to ask me a million questions without breathing. Usual Peter." Tony watched her eyes lower to the ground. "Why?"

"He's been a bit quiet at home," May said, a look of worry crossed her face that he immediately understood. A quiet Peter was usually a sign of something wrong.

"Well, I've only seen him in short snippets. A lot has gone on – coming back from the..." He couldn't bring himself to say the word *dead*. Although the wound had been cauterised, it still throbbed. The joy at having everyone back didn't erase the five years of grief that had been suffered. May looked like she needed some positivity, so he tried. "...and lots of changes coming

at him. Would make sense that he'd need time to process."

May nodded seeming to find some resolution in his words.

Kevin and Pepper came back out then, just as Peter made his way back to the cabin with a laughing child under each arm.

They said their goodbyes; Tony making sure he gave the kid an extra squeeze after their conversation earlier.

As Tony watched the Parker-Hayes contingent get into the car, he felt dogged by tiredness. For all his positive words earlier about his recovery, he was still frustrated by fatigue. The Wakandan Doctors had been clear that this was to be expected, but they hadn't been clear as to whether this would go away soon, or if ever. His body and brain had been affected by the Stones and there were no peer reviewed studies to consult that might tell him about the permanence of the effects. Bruce was improving, but with his vast physical differences, he was hardly a good comparison. He hated uncertainty; hated not being fully in control.

He was laying down on the couch under orders to get some rest from Major Potts when his phone buzzed and the message made him smile;

PP: *Thanks for a great weekend Tony.*

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Wow, so many comments yesterday pumped me up enough to give y'all another chapter 😊

Peter

Peter put the cup of hot chocolate complete with whipped cream and marshmallows in front of May as she sat scrolling through the news. Kevin had just left to take Alfie to pre-school on his way to work and Peter had taken this golden opportunity to have a one on one talk with her.

“Oooh!” May looked up at him with a smile. “Thank you sweetie.”

Peter spun around placing a slab of cake in front of her. “Oh, and I got that carrot cake you love from that place on 72nd.”

Peter smiled as he saw her eyes widen.

“Oh my God, I haven’t been there in so long.” She picked up the fork and took a bite, her eyes rolling with delight. “Oh, it’s just as good as I remember.”

She looked down at the treats in front of her before narrowing her eyes at Peter. “Did you get expelled?”

“No! No...I...” Peter paced to behind the chair, so he was opposite her. He took a breath.

“Here’s the thing. I know you aren’t happy about the idea of my going out as Spider-man, but please hear me out.”

May looked like she was going to say something so he plowed ahead. “I could do *so* much good, and I will be very safe, Mr Stark has set up some, actually really annoying, safety features and I

promise it won't interfere with school, sleep or helping out at home."

He let out a breath as she took a sip of her drink before putting it back down.

"OK," she said, picking up her fork and taking another bite.

"OK?" He'd been expecting more of a fight.

"Same curfew and ground rules as before." May put her fork down. "But OK."

"OK," Peter let the grin fill his whole face before swooping over to her and pulling her into a tight hug. "Thank you."

She laughed into his neck.

"You better get to school before you are late and grounded before you can even begin. I presume you'll be wanting to go out after your internship, so I will see you then. No later than 10.30pm."

He nodded before kissing her on the cheek and giving her another celebratory squeeze..

He grabbed his phone and fumbled out a quick message:

Happy: No need to pick me up today; I'm gonna make my own way to the Tower.

Peter wasn't sure how he made it through classes without combusting and as soon as the final bell rang, he was the first one out of the doors. He sprinted a few blocks to an abandoned alley and swapped out his clothes. He pulled the mask on and was filled with warmth when he heard the sound of a familiar voice.

“It’s good to have you back, Peter,” the AI said warmly like she had missed him.

He put his fingers against the wall and flexed them before effortlessly beginning to crawl up the side of it.

“It’s good to be back, Karen.”

Once he reached the top of the building he shot out some jets of webbing to make sure they were all in working order.

“Your web shooters are fully functional and full of fluid,” Karen said, realising what he was doing.

“Well in that case, there is no point in hanging around.”

He took off running at full speed and threw himself off of the building. His heart filled as he felt that momentary sense of flying before he released a web to the next building and let himself swing in a big arc. He let out a ‘woohoo’ as he reached the peak and pretty much repeated the whole thing – ‘woohoo’ included - as he webbed his way across town to the Tower.

He swung himself over from the nearest tallest building and then crawled the rest of the way up. Peter could see through the windows that Tony was in his personal lab, where he’d expected him to be. He webbed himself over and hung himself upside down, so he was hovering right by the window behind Tony.

“Karen, can you put a call through to Mr Stark please?”

“Of course, Peter.”

Peter watched as Tony stood up and a wide smile pulled across his face before he tapped his glasses. *Was that smile for me?*

“Hey kid, Happy said you were making your own way? You almost here?”

“I’m right behind you,” Peter said, smiling hard under the mask.

Tony turned around and did a double take seeing Peter hanging upside down outside the window.

“Friday, please open the window for the Spiderling.”

Peter crawled through the now open window and dropped down onto the floor. He pulled his mask off.

“You do know that I have a history of heart problems right?!” Tony quipped.

“I’m not sure I believe you. You’d have to have a heart for that to be true...” Peter said, putting out some finger guns.

“Finger guns, Parker? Do they teach you the easiest way to get bullied at that school?” Tony cringed as he came over and clapped Peter on the shoulder in a friendly way. “So, is this an authorised suit outing or am I going to have Aunt Hottie chewing my ear off later?”

“I talked to her like you suggested and she said it was OK!” Peter grinned. “So, I’m going out after we are finished tonight, but I couldn’t resist swinging over here. It’s so awesome to be back.”

Peter felt like a bottle of pop.

Tony grinned at his exuberance and Peter followed him towards the computers at the back of the lab. “Let’s put some of that energy to good use. I had time to think up some good ideas while I was laid up in Wakanda. And Shuri had some interesting input.” He paused and looked Peter up and down. “You need a spare pair of clothes?”

“No thanks, got mine.” Peter slipped his bag off his back and pulled out his clothes. He pulled the suit off and started to quickly get dressed.

Tony shook his head at his half naked state. “I suppose I should just be thankful that you’re a

boxer's and not a briefs man."

Peter shot him with some finger guns again and warmed as the man laughed deeply.

They'd been working for about an hour – Peter stepping in as Tony's other arm when things required two hands. He could move his hand easily – the dexterity in his fingers seemed almost back to normal – perhaps where the gauntlet had protected him more, but he struggled with strength in his upper arm – he couldn't pick up anything too heavy. He didn't have it strapped up today for a change, so Peter hoped that was a sign that it was improving. As they worked in close quarters, Peter was able to see more closely the scars rising from the neck of his band t-shirt. They looked like they had lessened in redness now. Did they bother Tony? Peter knew he liked his appearance to look a certain way; the tinted glasses, the immaculately trimmed beard. Peter hoped they didn't; that they just reminded him of how amazing he was to have risked himself to save everyone.

"There we go," Tony said, moving his arms through the holographic image of a new set of wings for the Falcon suit. "If we add some lighter alloys on the side, it should..."

Tony stopped and grasped his arm; making a pained sound. He slumped forward onto the table gripping it, his jaw clenching. Peter's scrambled around the table.

"Tony, Tony!"

His mentor made another cry of pain and almost slid off the table. Peter grabbed him and stopped him falling, easing him down onto the floor. This was worse than he had seen before.

"Do you have painkillers?" Peter asked.

"In my jacket," he gasped out.

Peter spotted it at the other end of the lab and sprinted there and back, fumbling through the pockets before his fingers touched a cool metal box. He opened it up to see pre-filled cartridges inside.

Tony took away his hand for a second to reach for one before another tremor of pain caused him to tense and grab back at his injured arm.

“I’ve got it. In your upper arm, yeah?” Peter said.

Tony nodded, his face red and sweat beading down it now. Peter took the top off the cartridge and pressed it against Tony’s upper arm. There was a swoosh sound as it injected and within 15 seconds Tony started to relax as the medication obviously began to take effect.

Tony started to move, but then thought better of it.

“The couch,” he murmured.

Peter helped him up, making sure he was shouldering as much weight as possible. He really wanted to pick him up and carry him there, but he figured Tony wouldn’t like that. They made it across a few steps and he gently placed Tony down on the sofa. He then darted across the room and pulled a bottle of water out of the mini fridge before opening it and handing it to the pale looking man.

Tony took a sip before speaking. “Thanks Pete.”

Peter stepped from side to side. “Should I get Happy? Or call Pepper?”

Tony put his hand up. “God no, I’ll never hear the end of it.” Peter must have frowned hard as Tony explained further. “She’s been on at me about overdoing the rehab. I might have accidentally done some more weights after the physio left.”

“Tony!”

“I know, I know. What can I say, I’ve always been an over-achiever,” Tony started to sit up like he was going to stand up.

“Woah, I think you should stay there. Maybe even go to bed for a bit,” Peter said, squeezing his hands together.

“I’m honestly fine,” Tony paused and looked him in the eye. “I didn’t mean to scare you there.”

Peter was about to say that he hadn’t, but then realised that was a lie.

“How about you lie there, and I’ll get the tablet and we can talk over some Spider suit ideas I had?”

Tony laughed. “Taking advantage of me in my weakened state, huh Parker? Fine, but just for a bit: then we need to get you some dinner. But I’m picking.”

Peter smiled at him and went and grabbed the tablet. He was pleased to see that Tony had laid back on the battered couch when he got back. He slid to the floor with his back against the sofa so Tony could read over his shoulder.

“You’re going to pick Shawarma again, aren’t you?”

Tony

“Wait, wait, wait, I’ve got more.” Peter’s face was flushed with excitement.

“I can’t take anymore kid.” Tony’s face hurt so badly, and he looked over at Happy who was shaking his head in disbelief.

“I had to make these bad chemistry jokes because all the good ones Argon.”

Tony groaned. “That one was bad. Bruce would love it.”

“I don’t get it,” said Happy.

Tony saw Peter about to explain but put his hand up to stop him. “If you have to explain it, then it won’t be funny.”

“Whatever,” Happy grumbled. “How’d my life end up surrounded by geeks?”

Tony saw Peter look at the clock on the wall for what felt like the fiftieth time since they sat down to eat. Well, he and Happy had eaten and Peter had inhaled enough food for Thor and Hulk combined.

“Kid, you are killing me. Just go patrol already,” Tony said.

Peter sat upright. “What? No, we have like another hour left, right?”

“I’m pretty wiped out after today and I know you’re dying to get out there. So, go on, help the good people of Queens out. I bet they’ll be glad to have you back.”

A wave of uncertainty passed over his face, but his excitement quickly won out. He pulled out his chair. “Ok, I’ll make it up to you at our next session. Thanks Tony.”

Tony waved him away. “Get out of here.”

Tony watched him retreat back towards the lab.

Happy smirked at Tony but didn’t say anything. “What, Hap?”

“He’s finally calling you Tony now. I didn’t think I would see the day.”

Tony shrugged it off, but he was surprised how much he enjoyed it. It’s not like the dropping of the formal name should change much about their relationship but it seemed to signal the change from mentor to something deeper. Who was he kidding, it had already been deep for him but it was nice to hear his first name out of the kid’s mouth in testament to that.

The kid came back in then, dressed in his suit, mask in hand and bag tied to his back.

“You want a lift a bit closer to Queens?” Happy asked.

“No thanks Happy, I’m looking forward to swinging around.” Peter smiled. “Thanks for dinner.”

“You coming up to the cabin this weekend?” Tony asked. “Happy can bring you Saturday.”

“I can?” Happy said, with a frown.

The kid shuffled his feet. “I don’t want to intrude; especially when you should be resting.”

Tony rolled his eyes. Peter was obviously concerned about his episode earlier. “I told you, I’m fine and I wouldn’t have asked you if I didn’t want you to come. Pepper and Morgan would love to see you too. Besides, Clint is coming up for the weekend with his kids – he has two teenagers so you can help occupy them.”

Peter seemed to relax. “Then yeah, totally. Can we go fishing again? Oh, and work on that old tractor you found – or maybe next time if you have guests? I’ll get my homework done on Friday night so that won’t interfere. But can I get back in time to patrol Sunday night?” All the words rushed out in a stream.

“Yes to all of that,” Tony said, realising that Peter would be a bit tiring after all. Peter rewarded him with a big dopey grin.

“Awesome. Right, I’m gonna go, thank you again for dinner. Bye guys!”

Peter headed for the balcony and Tony’s stomach lurched as he watched the kid take a running jump off the end of it.

Happy stood up and started clearing up the plates. “Weekend visits, huh? Since when did you get joint custody?” He threw a smirk at Tony.

Tony threw a napkin back at him and the driver laughed. Joint custody! Ha! Well the idea wasn't actually all that unappealing...

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Peter

“Peter, you have been injured. I suggest that you contact Mr Stark.”

Peter ignored Karen and the burning in his leg as he shot a web at the escaping criminal from his spot on the floor. He let out a sigh as the web wrapped around the guys legs, sending him to the ground.

Peter pulled himself up; as he stepped on his injured leg, a sharp pain ripped through him, white spots popping into his vision momentarily.

“Peter, your heart rate and cortisol levels are dangerously high. Protocol says that I should contact Mr Stark.”

“No Karen, just give me a minute to sort this guy out. Contact NYPD please.”

“Yes, Peter.”

Peter hopped over to the criminal on the ground who was now trying to crawl away, dragging his webbed legs behind him. He looked up, his eyes wide with terror as Peter stood over him.

“S-Spider-man?”

“Yes, it’s me, the guy you just stabbed. Not cool, dude.”

“My-my knife.”

Peter looked down at where the guy’s eyes were trained on his thigh – the handle of his

switchblade poking out of his flesh. Ah shit, it was still in there.

“You want it back?!”

The guy kind of half shrugged.

“Are you serious right now?” Peter would have laughed if he wasn’t starting to feel lightheaded.

“Sure, I’ll post it back to you once I fish it out of my flesh.”

Peter sent another web around the guy’s arms before letting himself lean his weight against a wall.

Peter looked around but the person who had been held up had run off long ago. “K-Karen, send video of the attempted mugging to the cops.”

“Yes, Peter. Your blood pressure is dropping. I have to contact Mr Stark.”

Peter looked at his leg. May was working – there was no way he could go home like this. He wouldn’t be able to climb up the wall to get to his room, which would mean going through the front door and seeing as Kevin was usually camped out in front of the TV, meant it was a no go.

“Karen, no need. I’m going to the Tower now. Plot the quickest course.”

“Yes, Peter.”

The pain was still present as he swung across the city; any movement sending spikes of pain up his leg, but it was better than trying to walk on it. He desperately wanted to pull the knife out, feeling the unwelcome intrusion at every turn, but he knew that at the moment it was stemming the bleeding. He’d found out the hard way what happened when you just yanked it out when you were nowhere near ready to stitch. Peter had a distinct memory of being chewed out by Mr Stark for it once they had stabilised the blood loss. Then by May when he got home. So no; no pulling the knife out just yet.

When he reached the Tower, he made his way to the private elevator in the underground car park, limping slowly as he did. Normally he’d climb up the outside of the Tower, but obviously that

wasn't on the cards for today. FRIDAY opened the elevator for him straight away and he slumped against the wall, letting out a shuddering breath.

"Medbay please Fri."

"I shall alert Mr Stark."

"No, no, he should be resting. I'll be OK FRI. Please don't disturb him."

The AI didn't respond and when the doors to the level opened, Peter let himself stumble out and down the hall to the first Medbay room.

Peter hopped over to the cabinet and started pulling out supplies - something to disinfect the wound, a stitches kit since that was looking likely, and some swabs to soak up the inevitable blood that would come once he pulled it out. He placed it all on a wheelie tray and pulled it over to the bed.

Peter looked down at the knife embedded in his leg. He should really remove the suit, but there was no way he could get it down over the hilt of the knife and he couldn't bear to cut it off. A patch job was one thing, but Mr Stark would surely kill him for ruining it completely. Why did this have to happen in his first week back patrolling? Parker luck strikes again.

Peter pressed the spider on his chest to loosen the fabric so that he could pull it off as soon as he extracted the knife.

"OK, come on Spider-man," Peter took a breath readying himself for the pain to come. "You can do this Peter."

He grabbed the knife and pulled it out in one quick tug: gripping the sheets of the bed as the pain washed over him.

Blood spurted down his leg and he stuffed a pad into the small slit in his suit.

"Shit, shit, ow." He took a moment to let his heart rate go down before he edged the suit down his

body. More blood ran down his leg as he had to let go of the now saturated pad and he managed to push the suit down, leaving it pooled on the ground.

Wow, that is a lot of blood.

Peter ignored the bile tickling the back of his throat as he looked at the mess of his leg. He pulled the pad away getting a quick look at the slash in his leg before it filled with blood again. It was deeper than he thought.

Really need to stitch this up quick.

Peter grabbed the bottle of disinfectant. His hands were shaking now as he twisted the lid off. He really didn't want to do this; he knew it would hurt but he had to. Infection was no joke, even with his Spider enhancements. Again, another lesson he had learnt through practice. Again, another chew out by Mr Stark. *(No idiot, running a bit of water over it doesn't count!)*

He took a breath, pulling the pad away before pouring a liberal amount of disinfectant into the wound. Peter gasped, gripping the bed, his head lolling back as white spots danced in front of him.

“Holy fucking fuckity fuck.”

“You kiss your Aunt with that mouth, Parker?”

Peter almost added a neck injury to his list of current issues as he whipped around to see Tony standing in the door to the Medbay, hands in his pockets and a tight smirk on his face.

“Oh, h-hey Tony.” Peter kicked himself for how guilty he sounded but surreptitiously pressed the pad against the wound that was *still* bleeding. Seriously, couldn't he get a pass, just for once? “I didn't have first aid kit at mine yet, so I thought I'd pop here and borrow some stuff. That's cool, yeah?”

Tony hummed an affirmative answer and Peter watched him take a few strides towards him. He instinctively tried to shuffle his thigh out of view, ignoring the pain moving it gave him.

“Ah, isn’t this like old times?” Tony said with a smile, letting his hands swing by his sides.

Peter forced a smile and tried to continue his subterfuge. “Me and you at the Tower together?”

Tony’s look darkened immediately. “No, you hiding life threatening injuries from me.”

Peter ducked his head and didn’t try to readjust his position again as Tony came around to the other side of the table.

“Jesus Christ, Parker!” Even from his lowered head state, Peter could see Tony’s shocked expression as he took in the blood on the floor.

Tony stepped closer and lifted Peter’s hand and the pad with it. Blood gushed again and ran down his leg.

“For God’s sake,” he snapped, pushing the pad down and grabbing more to push against the flow. “Fri, tell Dr Cho that I won the bet and we **will** be needing her assistance.”

“No, no, don’t call Dr Cho over here, I can stitch it up.” Peter didn’t want more fuss and definitely no needles. “It’s just a light...stabbing.”

Tony’s scowl deepened. “You’ll do exactly what I say. Lucky for you she is only upstairs having dinner with us after my check up earlier.” Tony set him with a steely look. “Get up properly on the bed.”

Peter started to move himself but immediately stopped when the room started to spin. He felt Tony’s arm catch him as he started to list forward.

“Let’s not add a faceplant injury to the list.”

Tony helped him up on to the bed, gently lifting his legs up. Peter felt a bit better just by doing that and let himself drop against the soft pillow and mattress. Peter watched Tony’s eyes scan him from top to bottom. “Any more injuries that I should know about?”

Peter shook his head. Tony sighed.

“Scan him Fri.”

“I just said no!” Peter frowned at him.

“Yeah and you’re just here ‘getting together a first aid kit’, right?” Tony glared at him.

Peter went to open his mouth – to protest *something* —but Tony cut him off. “Think real hard about what you say to me next, because I’m beyond pissed at you right now.”

Peter sat back at the harsh tone sent his way. He hadn’t seen Tony mad at all the last few weeks, unless you count the times he got his ass handed to him playing video games.

The doors to the elevator swished open and a few moments later Dr Cho appeared. It was strange to not see her in her usual white gown. She flashed him a smile as she grabbed a pair of gloves.

“Hey Dr Cho,” Peter said politely, a wave of tiredness suddenly creeping up on him.

“Hey Peter, so after all those questions about the Cradle, you thought you’d see if you got a chance to use it?” Her face crinkled into a smile as she grabbed a light and hovered over his leg, pulling the gauze off of him. “Knife, hmmm?”

Peter nodded and waved an arm in the direction of the tray. Dr Cho turned to look at the implement. Tony stepped closer and did the same, but he didn’t keep the same neutrally professional visage that she had.

“How long have you been bleeding for?”

“I pulled it out in here, so like 5 minutes?”

“At least you learned something...” Tony murmured as Dr Cho went over to the other side of room to get something.

“That was my first time being stabbed, how was I supposed to know I shouldn’t have pulled it out,” Peter snapped back. He was in pain and tired and didn’t like how Tony was being.

Tony went to answer but was cut off by Dr Cho, “Tony, if you don’t stop antagonising my patient, I’ll have to kick you out.” Dr Cho’s eyebrow was raised but her eyes were smiling.

Tony rolled his eyes at her but didn’t comment further.

Peter was quiet as Dr Cho worked.

“OK, the bleeding is slowing down, but I want to get the stitches in now. I’ve got some numbing agents, but they won’t last long with how you burn through them.” She turned towards Tony. “Do we have any of the new painkillers we made for Cap last year?”

“I’ll be fine, I don’t need anything.” Peter jumped in. The pain wasn’t so bad now he was still, and he got through stitches being put in in Wakanda, though he wished Bucky was here now to bear down on.

“Yes, he’ll have it. Stop being such a baby about needles.” Tony stalked to a cupboard and brought out some needles and a few vials.

“That’s not up to you.” Peter protested.

“No, shall I call Aunt May and ask her?”

Peter’s lips slammed shut but the heart monitor Dr Cho had attached started beeping faster. Tony picked up his suit from the floor and pulled out Peter’s phone from its specially designed pocket.

“You better tell her that you’re staying here tonight. Before you protest that you are fine to go home, I’m not moving you like this. If you are up to it, Happy will drop you to school in the morning.”

“May’s at work. Besides, if I tell her why, she might make me stop patrolling again.”

“Well, maybe that isn’t such a bad idea.”

“What?!”

The beeping from the monitor jumped up in frequency again.

“Tony...” Dr Cho’s voice held a warning.

Tony handed Peter his phone.

“Just let Kevin know then before the drugs make you doolally. I’ll be back.” Tony turned on his heel and out of the room.

Peter gulped down the lump in his throat at Tony’s retreating form. He was really mad. Like ferry incident level mad. Crap. Peter’s grip on the phone tightened and he swiped it open and found Kevin’s contact. He didn’t want to talk to him, so he sent him out a quick text-lie that the internship had run over so he was staying here and followed on with a more detailed one to May – that he had gotten a small injury so had gone to Tony’s to get it sorted and was staying over here.

His finger had barely pressed the button before it started ringing. *Kevin.*

He was contemplating answering it when Dr Cho came over – gowned up this time and with a needle in her hand. Peter eyed it like it was a feral animal.

“On the count of 3.” Dr Cho patted his arm and stood over his leg now. “1...2...”

Peter shifted his position and was met with a dull burst of pain in his thigh. He grunted and kept his eyes closed for a second. Right, stabbed in the thigh, memory still intact at least. He hadn't remembered much after the stitching up – the painkillers must be stronger than he'd had before. He tentatively opened one eye and saw dark blue wallpaper. So, he was up in his old bedroom at the Tower with no memory of getting up here. Yeah, that was super strong stuff.

Peter flexed his injured leg, pleased to note that his leg didn't feel too bad doing so. Walking on it would probably be ok. Which it would need to be as he really needed to pee right now.

Peter rolled over to see Tony sat in a chair next to the bed, his feet propped up on it and a tablet in his hand. The bags under his eyes were dark and Peter's stomach flipped. He'd been trying to keep Tony from stress and now it looked like he'd once again failed.

"Underoos," Tony addressed him flatly without looking at him, fingers still flying around the keys.

"Morning?" he asked, tentatively.

"5am – so yes, morning," Tony said, putting the tablet down and fixing his brown eyes on Peter now, "you've been in a drug infused sleep since 9pm last night."

"Cool, cool, cool." Peter pulled himself up and swung his legs over. "I'm just gonna..." he pointed in the direction of the en-suite.

As he stood up, there was a blast of pain in his leg and he must not have schooled his features quickly enough as Tony was up and out of his chair with a hand around his arm.

"I-I'm fine. Just a bit sore."

"Hmmm," Tony replied, "pain on a scale of 1-10?"

Peter tried a joke to break the tension. "Well, if I just stand on my right leg, it's a 0."

Tony scowled at him and Peter relented. "It's a 3 – 4 tops."

Tony didn't look like he believed him, but didn't say anything, just helped him into the bathroom.

"I don't need any help. I can..." Peter pointed to the toilet, "...and then shower."

"I should at least help you with the shower." Tony countered.

Peter gestured to the massive shower in the corner. "There is a literal seat in there for lazy showering. I can sit if I need to."

Tony paused for a moment before letting out a breath. "Fine, but if you need help you tell FRIDAY. I'd rather we both deal with the trauma of me seeing your junk, than you get a concussion from falling."

Peter grimaced at the thought of Tony helping him whilst he was naked; that would be mortifying.

"Seriously, if you fall in here rather than asking for help, I'll be pissed."

Peter doubted Tony could be any more angry at him than he currently was.

Tony turned to the door before looking back and apparently reading his mind: "Yes, even more pissed than I am already."

Well, that answered that burning question.

As instructed by FRIDAY, Peter made his way out to the kitchen once he was dressed. He felt better for the shower and was able to walk with only a slight limp that was getting easier to manage. The kitchen was deserted except for Tony, who was leaning against the counter with a coffee cup in front of him and a holoscreen floating above. His head jerked up on seeing Peter and he swiped it away with a finger.

“Sit,” he ordered, turning around to the other side of the kitchen.

Peter did as he was told, sliding up onto the stool, watching as Tony opened the oven. He turned then and placed a huge plate of pancakes in front of Peter.

“Wow, thank you.”

Tony didn’t say anything to that as he was doing something by the fridge. He came over then and placed some cutlery, a glass of juice and a bowl of fruit next to the plate.

“I want it all eaten.”

There was no room for negotiation in his tone, not that Peter particularly wanted to argue that.

“Yes sir,” Peter said quietly.

Tony didn’t speak a word while Peter ate – just started working on something on his tablet, saying a few things to FRIDAY.

The tension in the air was almost so bad that Peter couldn’t eat, but he pushed past it. The least he could do was do what Tony had asked.

He set the cutlery on top of the now empty plate.

“Thank you for breakfast, Mr Stark.” Peter rubbed his hands along his jeans.

Peter jolted slightly as Tony stopped what he was doing and whisked the plate away and back over to the sink where he put it in and turned the tap on. Peter watched the way Tony’s muscles were coiled tightly as he turned the tap off with a sigh, his arms stretched across the counter like the weight of the world was weighing down on his shoulders.

“Are...are you ok, Mr Stark?”

That was apparently enough to enrage Tony as he turned on his heel to face Peter: his forehead scrunched up.

“Am *I* ok?” Tony’s eyes darted over him. “*I’m* fine. *I* didn’t just have a rusty knife plunged into my body last night. *I’m* fucking dandy.”

Peter flinched back from the anger radiating off of Tony.

“You’re still mad,” popped out of his mouth.

Tony threw his arms in the air. “Yes, I’m still mad. What the hell were you thinking not contacting me or May even when you’ve been stabbed? I thought we were passed this bullshit years ago.”

“May was at work and you’re...” Peter didn’t want to finish his sentence as he didn’t think Tony would like to know Peter was worried about *his* health right now. He settled for what he did best – apologise. “I’m sorry, Mr Stark.”

“Stop it!”

Peter looked at him, really confused now. Stop what?

“Stop with the ‘Mr Stark’ bullshit again. Why are you calling me that?”

Peter hadn’t noticed he was doing that. “I didn’t realise...guess it’s instinct when I’m in trouble.”

Tony sighed and put his head in his hands, letting out a low groan. After half a moment, he looked up, straight into Peter’s eyes.

“Pete, Kid, I can’t...this can’t happen again. I need you to trust me with this stuff. I won’t take the suit away, hell I’ll go to bat with May for you, but you have to tell me when you get seriously

injured. I...especially after everything...I *need* to know buddy.” The softness in his eyes added a sharp hit to the guilt he felt, almost making Peter’s voice catch.

“Yes, OK, I’m sorry, I will.”

Tony’s face crumpled. “How the hell did I resist the puppy dog eyes for so long?”

Tony was around the counter and pulling him into a hug that Peter hadn’t realised that he so desperately wanted. Peter wrapped his arms around his mentor and breathed in deep.

“Why the hell didn’t you call me back?”

Kevin’s voice was so loud that Peter almost jumped into a defensive position on the ceiling, but instead he came to a dead stop, his sneakers squeaking to a halt on the linoleum floor.

“What?” he yelped out as Kevin came storming towards him. Peter backed up; the forced speed of the movement shooting pain through his still-healing thigh. His legs hit the back of the kitchen counter as Kevin invaded his space, leaving him with nowhere to go.

“You think you can just send me a text saying you’re staying out overnight and then ignore my calls?”

Peter hadn’t wanted to get into it on the phone with him last night whilst he was literally being stitched up and then he’d been out of it. Floating off with the fairies and then off to sleep.

“I...uh...sorry...I got caught up.” Peter faltered and Kevin’s eyes widened at his obvious lie. “I let May know too.”

Peter noticed Kevin's hands curl into fists at his additional sentence.

"I don't care if you told May. You don't get to just *tell* us you are staying somewhere overnight. You're a kid. I know it wasn't some girl you were with." Kevin's expression made Peter feel like even more a nerdy virgin than he already was and was quickly followed by an undisguised sneer. "So, what were you doing, huh? Drinking, drugs? Huh?"

Technically yes to the drugs.

Kevin was so close to him now, the smells were overwhelming his senses; his breakfast – *eggs* –; the sharp tang of aftershave. Peter almost wanted to gag but his heart was beating so fast it felt like it was lodged in his throat.

"I-I don't do that stuff. It was just science stuff...with Mr Stark...honest," Peter stumbled.

Kevin's sneer turned deeper; like science was a worse thing to be out doing late than illegal substances.

"Yeah, cos that would require a sleepover. I know you're lying about something." Kevin's finger was really close to his face now.

"Kevin!" May's voice broke the tension and Kevin stepped back immediately. "What's going on?"

"We were talking about his lack of respect for us." Kevin was away from him now, but his hands were on his hips; his negative energy still blasting in Peter's direction.

"We talked about this Kev," May's rubbed her forehead, her tone tired and it wasn't hard to realise that Peter had been a source of tension between them.

Kevin was back facing May now. "And I reiterate that it is not unreasonable of me to expect a kid to ask permission to stay out overnight. He knew you were working, he should have asked me."

"He was with Tony," May said, like she was repeating herself again. "He was safe."

“Tony Stark does not get to dictate what our 16-year-old does.”

Peter felt a lurch of disgust that Kevin was calling him his – taking ownership of him. It didn’t matter who he was to May; he was a stranger.

“We used to do it all the time, before.” Peter pushed out and May gave him a clear look that said ‘you are really not helping right now.’ “It’s not a big deal.”

Peter regretted speaking when Kevin’s angry glare found him again.

“Now things have changed.”

Before he could say anymore, Peter’s phone made a noise. He glanced down at it – seeing a message from Happy telling him to hurry up.

“Um, Happy is waiting to drop me to school – I was just getting my bag.”

Kevin seemed ready to blow up again but May beat him to it. “Go honey, or you’ll be late.”

Peter grabbed his bag from the bedroom and shot May an apologetic look before he slipped out of the apartment; hearing their raised voices as he ran down the stairs. He made his way to the car as fast as would seem humanly possible.

“Sorry Happy,” he said reflexively as he sat down and the car began to pull away with the older man letting out a mumbled grumble.

Peter’s throat felt tight as he tried to ease his breathing and slow his heart. That was not fun. He already was aware that Kevin didn’t have much time for him and he’d kind of accepted that. As much as he’d tried to bond with him, they were pretty different people and Peter had been unexpectedly thrust upon the man. As much as he didn’t want to admit it, this morning was scary. He’d never seen Kevin get so angry; he was a total softy with Alfie. He tried to zip up his school bag but noticed that his hands were shaking.

“-id...Peter!”

“Huh?” Peter snapped out of his haze to see Happy leaning over the back seat – his face a mixture of exasperation and concern.

“We’re here.”

Peter floundered, getting his bag together and getting out of the car. Swarms of kids were heading through the door now, indicating the bell was sounding soon.

“Kid?”

Peter turned around to see that the car window had been rolled down and Happy was leaning towards him; an expression on his face Peter was unused to seeing.

“Everything ok?”

Happy barely tolerated him, he wasn’t about to tell him about an argument at home. No doubt he and Tony would find a way to laugh at his latest mishap next time they were all together. He plastered on his brightest smile.

“Yeah, thanks for the ride Happy. Have a good day.”

The man’s eyes lingered on him for a second before he gave a sharp nod and the window started to rise up, leaving Peter staring back at his own distorted image in the glass.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to all who are reading.

Out of interest, when referring to the AI do you prefer to see it written as FRIDAY or Friday? Let me know in the comments if you can 😊

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The heavy feeling that had settled in the pit of his stomach hadn't dissipated by the time lunch rolled around. He had sent an apology message to May in-between lessons but she had only replied that they would '*talk about it later*'. She was on a late shift today so at least he wouldn't have to deal with that conversation until tomorrow. No doubt she would suggest telling Kevin the truth, but there was no way Peter was down for that. He knew it made logical sense, and maybe even would get Kevin off his back a bit, but everything inside him told him not to do that.

Ned was waiting for him at their usual table; MJ not having arrived yet. He looked agitated - Peter hadn't gotten the chance to talk to him yet as Ned had been out for the first half of the day at a dentist appointment. As soon as he sat down, Ned started whisper-yelling at him.

"What happened last night, dude?!" Ned took in a breath. "You didn't respond to my messages until this morning."

"Sorry, ended up staying at the Tower after some doofus thought I'd make a good pin cushion."

Ned's mouth hung open for a second and Peter was glad that he wasn't currently eating. "You got stabbed?!"

The cafeteria was noisy so only one or two heads nearby looked over before looking away again, clearly not believing that was a real statement.

Peter gritted his teeth. "Say it a bit louder, I'm not sure all the lunch ladies heard you."

Ned at least looked sheepish before he lowered his voice. "Are you ok?"

Peter winced; the thought seeming to remind him of the continued ache in his thigh.

"Yeah, it was deep. I tried to take care of it myself at the Tower, but Mr Stark caught me and now he is seriously pissed at me." Peter pushed his hands through his unruly mop.

Ned's eyebrows danced. "Why? I mean it's not like you haven't been stabbed before..."

"I know, right? He is being weirdly, like, OTT about it. "*Don't hide injuries*" and '*Maybe it would be best if you stop patrolling*'. Practically forced a big breakfast on me, yada, yada."

Ned's eyes drifted off to the side. OK, so maybe his Tony Stark impression needed work.

MJ came and sat at the end of the table, ignoring them like she usually did. He nodded at her and then carried on; the rest of what he said not giving anything away.

"Then when I got home this morning, Kevin was all on my case about how I need to ask permission to stay out, blah blah. Yeah, so, super lame morning." Peter let out a breath.

Ned didn't respond verbally but stood up sharply, gripping his tray as he did.

"Must be *so* lame for you having two father figures in your life." Ned's face was full of an anger that Peter had never seen before. Before he could speak, Ned strode away, Peter having to crane his neck to see the boy empty his lunch tray and disappear out of the door.

As he turned his head back, he saw MJ looking at him; her own expression mirroring surprise. The surprise vanished as she took a slow bite out of the apple in her hand without taking her gaze off of him. He whipped his eyes to the table as he felt heat prick up his neck.

He could count on one hand how many times Ned had been upset with him over the course of their long friendship; even then he had never seen him so pissed off – not being the target himself. He had to fix it.

"I have to..." Peter gestured behind him as he stood up and caught MJ's eye. She nodded back at him, her lips quirking into a sad smile.

Peter ran out of the lunch room and started looking around for Ned. He tried everywhere he could think of but by the time the bell rang for his next class, he hadn't found him.

They didn't have any more classes together that afternoon and Ned hadn't responded to any of the messages that Peter sent. His last class was at the other end of the school to the main entrance but he jogged his way past groups of slow walking teens to try to get there as fast as possible.

He usually walked part of the way home with Ned and he hoped they'd have time to talk about whatever had just gone on at lunch today. He felt unsettled not having heard from him.

As he exited the school and reached the top of the stairs, his eyes scanned through the crowds for his best friend's familiar form. He frowned as he didn't spot him. Maybe he had to stay behind and talk to a teacher or something?

"He left already." MJ's voice lifted behind him and he turned towards it.

"Ned? He did?" Peter's voice cracked a bit and her dark eyes narrowed on his as she reset her backpack on her shoulder. "Thanks MJ, I'll see if I can catch him up."

"I wouldn't..." Her voice rose and he turned back to face her again. They had a class together earlier, maybe he had spoken to her about it?

"Did he say something? About why he is upset."

MJ didn't answer. She was loyal like that. She never assumed just because you said something to one friend that it meant it was ok to tell another, regardless of how close you were. The fact that Ned had obviously talked to her, but flat out avoided him, made his stomach clench.

"Just give him some space. I'm sure you can make up tomorrow."

Make up? He had to make up for something? For being insensitive, right?

"Oh. OK. Thanks, MJ."

Peter decided to ditch the subway and walk all the way home to clear his head. It didn't work. All he could think about was Ned. May always said he was a terrible over thinker. He hated the idea of anyone being upset with him – for him being the reason someone was upset. Especially Ned, who had stuck by him through so much over the years. Then there was Ned, having just lost his Dad, and he was complaining about Tony and Kevin in the same mouthful. Not that Kevin felt like a father figure to him at all; far from it. But Tony...well, yeah, he did. God, had Ned felt like he was rubbing it in his face? He had waxed lyrical about his weekends at the cabin; telling Ned about The Parker Foundation and even how Tony was giving him hugs all the time now. Oh no, had Ned been gritting his teeth through it all? God, he really had been such an insensitive prick.

By the time he let himself into the apartment, his body tingled with shame only added to by the fact that there were still no replies from Ned.

“School let out 90 minutes ago.”

Peter had barely registered that he was in the kitchen and Kevin was coming over to him. His Spidey sense buzzed a little louder.

“Oh yeah, I decided to walk back,” Peter said tiredly as he slid his bag up onto the kitchen table.

Kevin's hand slammed on the table making Peter jump. “I made it clear this morning that you tell us where you are and already you are disobeying me.”

“I didn't...I wasn't...”

“Give me your phone.”

“What?”

“Actions have consequences.” Kevin stood up taller, his eyes hardening. “You can have it back in the morning.”

“May wouldn't like you to take my stuff.”

Kevin's eyebrow arched at that. "Well she isn't here, I am. Hand it over."

Peter looked down at Kevin's outstretched hand. He wasn't normally someone to disobey someone older than him. He'd always been taught to be polite. But this was something else. This was unfair and Ben and May had never been unfair with their punishments. He couldn't be without his phone tonight, what if Ned called?

"No, I-I need it." The stuttering wasn't making him sound very firm.

Kevin stepped forward then; his height meaning he was staring down at Peter, making him feel small.

"I don't think you want me to take it off you." His voice was low and the buzz at the back of Peter's neck became almost painful. On one level he knew he shouldn't feel intimidated by this man. He was Spider-man; he could stop a car with his bare hands. But staring back up at Kevin's twisted features, his only physical response was fear.

Kevin wasn't going to back down about the phone. May just wanted them to all get along and if he put up a fight about this, it would only cause even more tension between her and Kevin than he had already done this morning. It was just a phone, right?

Be smart about this. Let him feel like he's in charge and then he'll calm down.

Peter slipped his hand in his pocket and slid the phone into Kevin's waiting palm. He gripped it eagerly and Peter watched as he pocketed it. At least he could feel safe in the knowledge that there was no way Kevin would be able to look in it. Not with how tightly Tony had it encrypted.

"Next time," Kevin's finger jabbed deeply into his chest; the shot of pain making him look up at the man in alarm, "don't make me ask you twice."

"I..I..."

"Jesus, the fucking stuttering is so irritating." Peter shuddered as Kevin gripped him tightly on the arm and shoved him in the direction of his room. "Stay out of my sight."

Peter barely had the presence of mind to catch his bag that was thrown roughly at him by Kevin, before he stumbled into his room and closed the door. He sat on his bed and stared at the wall ahead: the ache in his chest and arm reminding him that yes, that had actually just happened.

Peter's hand kept a loose grip on the phone in his pocket as he got off the train and headed towards school. He was kind of glad that he hadn't slept well as it meant he was up early and out of the house with plenty of time to action his plan.

- 1) Intercept Ned before classes,
- 2) Apologise and hope he accepts,
- 3) Hug it out.

Kevin had been nowhere to be seen this morning but his phone had been sat on the kitchen table, so he took that as a sign he was meant to take it back. His heart had skipped when he saw nothing from Ned at all last night and only a few checking-in texts from Tony. Ned had never not responded to him for such a long time and his stomach clenched thinking about it. He couldn't lose Ned.

By the time he made it indoors, his heart was beating faster. The halls were fairly empty, but he still staked out his position in front of Ned's locker.

The phone in his pocket started buzzing and seeing Tony's name, he picked up.

"Hey Mr S- hey Tony,"

"Spiderling."

Peter could hear the smile in his voice and felt his tight shoulders relax.

“There I was starting to think you were avoiding me.”

“Avoiding you?”

“Not answering my messages. I know you have the phone surgically attached to your hand at all times.”

“You literally have FRIDAY programmed into your glasses. So I’d say that sounds more like you...”

“Ha, well yes, can’t deny that.” Tony’s voice was a calming balm as Peter kept his eyes pinned on the door down the hall that his friend would be arriving through.

“Well...?”

“Huh? Well, what?”

“Why didn’t you answer? My God, I sound like an overeager co-ed.”

“You could never sound that young.”

Tony let out a wheeze. “Such high levels of sass so early. You are begging me to take you to the Compound for some training, by which I mean my kicking your tiny butt around the training room until you learn some respect for your elders.”

“Well, given your age, that might take some time.”

His phone made a noise and he looked down at it to see Tony’s face – he had now switched to video call.

“What? Why?”

“I had to be sure that someone wasn’t impersonating you as it sounded a lot like you were calling me old, Parker.” Tony’s eyebrow was arched and light dance across his dark eyes.

Peter smirked and pretended to try to hide it. “Would I ever insinuate such a thing, sir?”

“Better.” Tony’s face relaxed into an easy smile. “So the messages I left were about your leg – should I assume you ignored them because you didn’t want to admit it’s still bad? I can have Cho back here later tonight.”

“Oh no, honestly the leg is fine – see,” Peter held the phone out and did some squats, ignoring the funny looks he got from a group of girls at the other end of the hall. Oh well, it wasn’t like he had a reputation to uphold or anything. “So nothing to worry about Tony. My phone was confiscated.”

“May confiscated it for the stabbing incident?” Tony looked confused and rightly so. It wouldn’t be out of character for her to bench him or ground him for lying (not that he felt he had), but she wasn’t one to take away his phone, in case there was an emergency.

The light bruises that were evident on his arm this morning seemed to throb as he spoke. “No, but Kevin did for not asking permission to stay over.”

“Ah...”

“Actions have consequences,” Peter muttered remembering Kevin’s words and angry expression.

Tony put his fingers to his chin; resting it on top. “I forget about the whole secret identity thing. I could call him and apologise; take the heat off you.”

After how Kevin had reacted about him being at Tony’s, that didn’t seem a good plan. “No, no, thanks, it’ll blow over.”

“You thought about telling him the truth? I mean he is part of your family now...”

“No.” Hearing Tony talk about Kevin in those terms left him with a hollow feeling in his chest.

Tony's eyebrows rose at the snap of his voice.

"O-K. That's a decisive response from usually such an indecisive person." Tony's brown eyes seemed to be boring into him now.

"Just, it's not the right time now. Maybe in the future. Everything is still so...new." Peter let out a breath. It wasn't an out and out lie – who knows maybe in the future he might want to tell Kevin, but with how things were between them now, he couldn't imagine that man knowing his most guarded secret. It didn't feel safe. *Kevin* didn't feel safe.

The doors opened and Peter saw Ned coming in, his eyes mostly to the floor.

"Sorry, but I have to go. Can I call you later?"

"Internship tonight remember - Happy will pick you up." Tony replied.

That sounded a lot better than being at home. "Great, see you then Mr- er -damn it -Tony."

Tony threw his head back in a laugh before the picture cut out.

Peter slipped the phone in his pocket and wiped his sweaty hands along his jeans. He took a deep breath before gripping his backpack strap and jogging over to Ned.

"Um hey," Peter's heart thumped against his chest.

Ned looked up at him, his expression guarded in a way that Peter had never seen directed at him. His throat tightened so that when he spoke it came out with a slight squeak.

"C-can we talk?"

Ned gave him a tired nod and they walked through to the back of the school where there were

benches for lunch. Peter sat on one of them and Ned opposite him.

“Look Ned, I’m really sorry for how I acted yesterday. It was really insensitive of me. I’m sorry.”

Ned let out another sigh. “I should have replied to your messages. That was shitty of me. I just... you get another two chances at having a father type person in your life and I just think you could be a bit more grateful. They were obviously worried about you and they would only worry if they cared.”

For a minute Peter took pause – to have more chances at father figures had meant the pain of losing two of them. He ignored that – all that mattered now was that he and Ned made up and Ned *was* right, Tony had definitely shouted because he was worried – that was obvious now.

“Yeah, you’re right. Sorry.”

There was a pause.

“Are we...are we cool?” Peter looked up from under his eyes – his thumb tapping against the table.

“Always bro.” Ned let out a gentle smile before leaning in to do their special handshake.

Chapter End Notes

What do you think about Peter’s actions here?

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Peter

Peter finished webbing up a would-be car thief to a lamppost. His eye throbbed where the guy had managed to get a lucky hit in when Peter had been distracted trying to stop his accomplice get away – which he managed to do. He made sure the webbing was properly secured to something this time before he sent in a report to the Police.

“Try not to steal other people’s things man. It’s really not cool.”

The guy grumbled something unintelligible.

He turned to leave but heard a voice cry out from behind him.

“Yo, Spidey! It’s good to have you back, man!”

Peter turned to see a man hanging out of his window waving, whilst holding a phone up.

“It’s good to be back, sir,” he called back before latching onto a building and starting to swing away.

“Peter, it is almost your curfew. If you want to be home in time, you should head back now.” Karen’s voice rang through.

“Thanks Karen.” Peter didn’t really want to, but he was being extra careful; he didn’t want Aunt May to revoke her permission. She was working tonight but after the other day, he was sure Kevin would be on him about it if he was even a minute late. He had been constantly on Peter’s case about curfews and where he was after school since the stabbing incident the other week. He was

surprised that the man hadn't grafted a tracker to his skin.

Peter made it back to the alleyway he'd hidden his bag in and changed out his clothes. Being back on patrol had been even better than he remembered. It was different to being in a battle – something about directly helping people left him with a warm feeling. I mean some of the stuff was scary, that knife in his thigh a case in point, but some of what other heroes might call mundane stuff, was often the most satisfying. Keeping victims calm until police arrives, aiding elderly people, helping kids find their cats – all the stuff Tony liked to gently tease him about - those were the interactions he remembered the most. Overall being back out in the community had really put a swing in his step (pun intended). Even MJ had told him to drop his 'shit eating grin' at lunch today and he'd had such a fit of joyful laughter that even she'd joined in.

He made it back to the building and carefully scaled the wall to his bedroom window. At least here they were only on the second story, so if anyone saw him climbing, it didn't look humanly impossible, just pretty dangerous. He reached the windowsill and went to open the window. Shit, he'd forgotten to leave it unlocked. *So out of practice, Parker.*

He jumped down and headed into the building in the normal way, which was infinitely less fun. He made out voices on the other side of the door as he pushed his key into the lock and opened it up. Kevin and two guys Peter didn't recognise were sat at the dining room table. There was a bottle of whisky on the table and Peter could see they were playing Poker. All eyes turned to him.

"Um, hey," he said, putting up a hand.

The heavy-set guy closest to him was the first to speak.

"So, you must be May's kid that blipped then?"

"Nephew," Kevin clarified, looking at Peter in the cold way that he usually did.

"I'm Peter, sir," Peter said respectfully as he stepped forward.

"Sir? He obviously doesn't know you yet." The other guy who had a baseball cap on laughed at himself.

The guy who'd addressed him batted the man next to him with his palm. "Ignore him, I'm Jeff and

that is Trey. We work with your Uncle at the precinct.” The guy – Jeff - had a wide, genuine smile.

Peter didn’t like Kevin being referred to as his Uncle. Like he was anything like Uncle Ben. He bit back a response that definitely wouldn’t be considered respectful.

“Nice to meet you both. I was just going to get a drink – you guys need anything?” Peter asked, manoeuvring around the table to the fridge.

“You can tell he isn’t yours Kev, he is too damn polite.” Trey cackled, lighting a cigarette that Peter knew Aunt May wouldn’t want smoked in her house. Kevin didn’t reply, his eyes focussed on the deck of cards he was shuffling.

“Jack Daniel’s has got us covered so no thanks” Jeff said, with a not-quite sober smile “You go to school around here then Peter?”

“I go to Midtown High,” Peter replied.

“Fancy,” said Trey, taking a swig of his whiskey.

“How the hell do you afford that Hayes?” Jeff said, bringing Kevin into the conversation.

“Oh, he got himself a scholarship.” Kevin didn’t look up but took a sip of his drink.

“So, you are extra smart then kid?” Jeff said. “But not smart enough to avoid the bullies, huh?”

Peter frowned. What was he talking about?

“You’ve got a shiner there.” The man continued, pointing towards his face.

Peter put his hand up to his face, having forgotten about it. It didn’t matter much; it would be gone by morning.

“You didn’t have that when you got back from school earlier...” Kevin leant forward now, his eyes searching Peter’s, as if it was the first interesting thing about Peter that he’d heard.

“Oh, it’s nothing.” Peter shrugged, hoping to distract from himself as he pulled a bottle of water from the fridge.

“Ooh, you got yourself a regular scrapper there, Hayes.” Trey taunted Kevin, who gave him a scowl.

Jeff was more serious. “You better not get yourself mixed up in stuff out on the streets. We got enough young punks causing trouble as it is.”

“I won’t, sir.” Peter said, eager to get away from this conversation.

“I heard Spider-man is back; so maybe he will start acting as a deterrent again.” Trey said, scrolling through his phone. “Yeah, look, a few more videos have been posted the last few days. There’s one from tonight.”

Trey pressed play and there was a video playing from the car theft earlier that, from the angle of it, seemed had been taken by the man who’d welcomed him back.

“Fuck that.” Kevin intoned loudly. “These fucking vigilantes are a law unto themselves.” Kevin gulped another drink of whiskey. “We should be bringing them in and keeping them out of Police work.”

“You’ve started him off again...” Peter heard Jeff say under his breath.

“Aren’t they all under those laws now, The Accords?” Trey asked.

“The Accords, what a fucking joke!” Kevin spluttered out, grabbing the bottle of whiskey and refilling his glass.

“They got disbanded after the dusting,” Jeff explained to Trey.

“They never did anything. It was all fucking lip service. Half of the fucking Avengers should’ve been thrown in jail after the Blip but, oh no, nothing happened. I reckon Stark made sure of that—probably paid off a bunch of people. I’d bet my rats ass before the decimation, that prick knew exactly where they were hiding. He should rot with them too.”

“They risked their lives to bring everyone back and keep us all safe, and you want them to be in prison?!” Peter heard the anger in his voice, but he couldn’t hold it back; his hands turning into fists where they were shoved into his pockets. “They keep risking their lives *every day* to help people, just like cops do, I’d have thought you would at least respect that?”

Kevin put his glass down and levelled a fiery stare at Peter.

“The kid’s got a point. We wouldn’t have Trey back without them; we wouldn’t have anyone.” Jeff said, grasping the other man’s shoulder. “Let’s drink to life!”

Trey and Jeff lifted their glasses and after a beat Kevin joined them; clinking his glass against theirs.

Peter saw an opportunity to get out of there. “I’ve got some homework to do. Nice to meet you both.”

They both made similar ‘see you kid’ noises as Peter drifted off to his room, with the sound of a new conversation starting behind him as he did.

His fists uncurled as he made it into the room and closed the door. Although he knew that other people had those views about the Avengers, he hadn’t heard someone directly spouting that stuff in front of him. About the people he cared about. What the hell did Kevin know about any of it? Had he almost died trying to save the world?

Peter took a few deeper breaths and tried to calm himself down. It took a few minutes and some self talk before his anger had abated enough for him to get his homework out. He was tired of trying so hard to be nice to Kevin all the time when all he got back was anger or cold indifference. It didn’t matter how much he helped with Alfie, or kept the house straight or even played along with the curfew he wanted, Kevin could not be pleased. It had been weeks of treading on eggshells around the man to try to help the new situation, for May and Alfie’s sake, but it didn’t seem to

make any difference.

He'd gotten almost all of his work done by midnight when he heard the sounds of Kevin's not-so-sober friends leaving the apartment. It was a miracle that they hadn't woken Alfie, but then again he did seem to be one of those kids that slept like the dead.

Peter was slipping his pyjama top over his head when his bedroom door opened to reveal Kevin. Peter could smell the whiskey from here and when he looked into his eyes, he could see they were glassy.

"Where the hell do you get off talking to me like that?"

Peter's spidey tingle grew louder. But he was tired of always taking the high road.

"I just told you what I thought," Peter said, standing taller.

"You disrespected me in front of my friends."

"You did that when you started spouting rubbish."

Peter saw him move towards him, his hand outstretched and instinctively dodged out of the way. Kevin's eyes widened and he realised that he must have moved too fast. He couldn't let Kevin know that he was enhanced. His Spidey sense shrilled but he stilled himself and let a now angrier Kevin grab his top in one hand and his chin in the other. His fingers dug into Peter's skin as he turned his head to the light; looking at his injured eye. He pulled Peter's face back around roughly, so he was forced to look at him; the stale breath attacking his sense of smell.

"You think you're some tough guy now because you get in a few licks in some street fight?"

Peter didn't respond, his heart hammering. His skin crawled at the man's touch so he pulled Kevin's hand off his chin firmly. Kevin didn't resist, but then pulled his arm back and backhanded him with enough force and surprise that Peter stumbled backwards and onto the floor; pain bursting through his cheekbone.

Peter put his hands to the pain, pushing himself up against wall in case anything else came at him; his eyes on Kevin.

“Shit. I didn’t mean to...you shouldn’t have...” Kevin’s put his hands through his hair. “I...”

Kevin swept past him and out of the door. Peter’s heart-rate didn’t have the chance to go down much before he was back with an icepack wrapped in a tea towel. He held it out to Peter who tentatively took it; not really wanting to accept anything from this man.

Kevin squatted down next to him then; still too close for comfort. “Keep it on there; it’ll help.”

Peter pressed it to his stinging cheek; wincing as the cold hit. It would help if he hadn’t hit him.

“I shouldn’t drink. It brings out the worst of me and we had a terrible patrol today...” Kevin mumbled excuses before looking Peter in the eyes. “If May found out, it would break her heart.”

Finally, one thing that they could agree on. Peter gave Kevin a short but distinct nod and the man visibly relaxed.

“Can I get you anything else?”

Get the fuck away from me. Peter shook his head and was relieved as the man stood up and backed out of the room.

Peter waited until he heard Kevin’s footsteps recede before he stood up and closed the door, his legs wobbling as he did. What the hell just happened?

Peter realised he must have slept at some point, but it sure didn’t feel like it. He didn’t know what he was feeling but his body went through the motions. He got dressed, packed an overnight bag for his planned trip to the cabin with some clothes and other stuff.

He opened the door to his bedroom when he heard that May and Alfie were awake. Kevin would no doubt be sleeping off his hangover.

“Peter, come have some breakfast,” May called, having heard his door open.

As he rounded the corner into the living room, he saw Alfie sat at the table; his face covered with syrup. May was sat next to Kevin, his arm around her; her body pressed into his. She giggled as she whispered something to him and kissed his cheek. She looked up to see him and shot him a tired smile.

“Kevin made your favourite this morning.”

Trying to keep me sweet – quite literally looking at the spread on the table. Peter purposely didn’t look at Kevin.

“I’m not hungry, thanks.”

“Not hungry?” May’s brows furrowed and she pulled out of Kevin’s hold to come around the table. She pressed her hand to his head. “Are you coming down with something?”

He shook his head.

Her dark eyes regarded him. “Well then, you need to eat,” she raised an eyebrow at him, no doubt in relation to his metabolism. “Sit.”

May moved away from him towards the cupboard where the plates were. As he sat down, Kevin caught his eye for a second before his nervous gaze dropped down to Peter’s cheek; relief palpable on his face. There was only a yellow mark there now; he probably thought that he hadn’t hit him that hard.

May came back to Peter, placing a plate of pancakes on the table in front of him.

“Come on; eat up.” May let out a yawn. “I’m done. I’ve got to sleep now. What time is Happy coming for you?”

Peter swallowed the pancake that felt like sand in his mouth. “In a few minutes.”

“I’ll see you Sunday night then. Be sure to give my love to all the Starks.” She got up and kissed his forehead. “And I’ll see you two boys in about 6-8 hours.” She ruffled Alfie’s hair, who still didn’t look up from his pancakes.

Peter felt Kevin’s eyes on him as pushed the pancakes into his mouth. He practically jumped and ran when Happy’s text came through saying he was waiting downstairs.

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The water lapped gently as the breeze slowly blew over it. Peter relaxed deeper into the chair and looked over at Tony. His sunhat was sat over his face, covering his eyes and from the rise and fall of his chest, Peter reckoned he had fallen asleep.

After sleeping on the drive up here, which Happy had thanked him for, it had been a whirlwind of activity for Peter. A visit to the Farmers market followed by making marinara sauce from the fresh tomatoes they bought, which Peter had been surprised that Tony knew how to do – *‘hey, my mother was Italian you know’* -to playing endless games with Morgan. Then a delicious pasta dinner and more talk about time travel before a movie and bed. Then this morning he and Morgan had made Tony and Pepper breakfast – well he had, and Morgan had told him where to find everything, whilst she sat at the island colouring in. He and Tony had tinkered in the garage during the morning, looking at the old tractor and figuring out what parts they would need to source. After lunch, Pepper had whisked Morgan away for a playdate at a friend’s house. Now it was just him and Tony sat on the deck fishing. He used the word fishing loosely as they hadn’t caught much and anything they did, they threw back in – Morgan’s orders.

Tony moved in his sleep and the hat slipped off and onto the decking. Peter had gotten used to him looking older – five years had aged him as you’d expect – but he hadn’t been used to seeing him as fragile as he had been since the Battle of Earth. Peter had even gotten used to seeing the scars on him- they were just part of who he was now – but today in the dappled sunlight, they seemed to stand out more.

Despite how busy they'd been, snippets of Friday night kept coming back to him. The fierce look on Kevin's face as he had swung at him flashing over and over again. He knew what Kevin had done was wrong. Other than an occasional swat on the butt when he was little, Ben and May had never raised a hand to him. He hadn't needed a Captain America PSA to tell him that was wrong. But his experiences had taught him that nothing in the world was black and white.

It would be really simple to say '*Hey Tony, Kevin hit me last night, what should I do?*' But then Peter remembered seeing Tony in pain last week; the tiredness that showed in his eyes when they'd been working for only a short while. Tony had enough to be dealing with right now – he needed to focus on his recovery. He didn't need to worry about Peter's small-time problems. He would handle it. He was Spider-man for god's sake. So; what would Spider-man do? He would protect people. He would protect May. It was obvious that she adored Kevin and so did Alfie. If she knew, she'd be gutted and she'd dealt with enough heartache. She deserved happiness. Maybe Kevin really was having a bad day; people deserve second chances, right?

His thoughts were interrupted by the beep of a horn which startled Tony awake.

"Jesus," Tony said, his head darting around, looking for danger.

They both looked up towards the cabin to see the town car and Happy stepping out of it.

Tony started to head towards him. "Hogan, you want to be out of a job by giving me an actual heart attack?!"

Peter chuckled and followed behind to hear their entertaining bickering.

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Five days.

That was all it took.

Alfie ran to his room; a broken picture frame on the floor where he and Peter had been sat building Lego.

Peter picked up the broken frame and called after him. "It's ok Alfie; it was an accident."

Kevin came storming down the hallway; his body slick with sweat where he'd been lifting weights in his room.

"What happened?"

"He just knocked it off." Peter offered up the now glass-less frame. Kevin stepped towards Alfie's room and Peter stepped in front of him, not wanting him to shout at Alfie. "It was just an accident."

Kevin levelled him with a look and brushed past him and into Alfie's room. Peter stayed close by: there was no way he would let him hurt Alfie. He stopped in the doorway and watched Kevin sit down on the bed where Alfie was curled up crying.

"It's ok buddy, it was just an accident." Kevin stroked his back.

"I'm s...sorry. I broke Grandma Hattie."

"Shhh, it's ok. We can fix it."

Peter watched as Alfie turned into Kevin for a hug. He relaxed; Kevin wasn't going to hurt him; he hadn't even shouted at him. For a moment he was reminded of Ben, comforting him after he'd fell at the playground.

"I'm going to go and clear the glass up, so stay in here so you don't get cut."

Peter backed out of the doorway as Kevin came out and closed it behind him.

“I told him it was no big deal - just a mistake - but he just shot off-“

Maybe because Kevin had just been so gentle with Alfie; maybe because he hadn't heard any anger from him with the little boy, maybe that was why when Kevin's hand wrapped around his throat and thrust him into the wall, he wasn't expecting it. Nor after, when Kevin's fist met his stomach. When Peter fell to the floor from the impact, Kevin followed it up with two kicks into his side, causing a groan to escape his lips.

“No, you being here - you even being *alive* - is the mistake. You don't belong here.” He threw in a final kick for good measure. “Don't get in the way of me and my son again.”

There was no apology this time. No pancake breakfast.

Peter spent the rest of the day in his room; his stomach and ribs throbbing. He thought about slipping out of the window and going on patrol, but the truth was he felt truly shaken. It wasn't a one off; it wasn't a drunken mistake. Kevin had been well and truly sober.

May came to his room not long after she got back from her shift. She looked drawn and so very tired, like she had been the last few weeks. He'd have to tell her though, wouldn't he?

“Hey sweetie, can you come out here for a little chat?”

Weird. He followed her out to the kitchen table where Kevin was sat. He looked fairly serious. Maybe he'd told May himself? Got ahead of the story – whatever story you tell someone about why you beat up their 16-year-old nephew.

May sat next to Kevin and ushered Peter to sit down opposite them. He slid into the chair, wiping his damp palms along his trousers.

“We have something important to talk to you about.”

“OK.” *Me too.* A wisp of nerves curled around his stomach.

Peter watched as she wrapped her hand around Kevin’s before looking at him.

“It’s been a bit of a shock, but we’re expecting a baby.”

Peter choked on his own spit. “What?!” His throat felt tight.

She pushed an ultrasound photo in front of him. It just looked like a splodge.

There was a whooshing effect in his ears as May continued to talk. He heard her say that it had come out of the blue – she was already 5 months along, that they didn’t think they could have any more kids given her age, that she would have to be cautious as she is considered high risk but she’d also have to work extra shifts to put some money aside for maternity leave. He heard her say all these things, but a voice in the back of his mind just kept repeating - *you can’t tell her now, you can’t tell her now, you can’t tell her now.*

“Peter,” May’s fingers brushed his, causing him to get his focus back and look at her worried face. “I know this is another change for you, after everything. But in reality, it won’t change anything; other than some logistics. I, *we’ll*, still be here for you.”

He cleared his thick throat and forced a smile on to his face. “I’m really happy for you; don’t worry about me Aunt May, I can take care of myself.”

Chapter End Notes

So, what do we think about Peter’s thought process?

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

I've been loving everyone's comments so much that I wanted to pop up another chapter. Please keep them coming - I love hearing all your thoughts and theories!

Let me know what you think!

Peter

"Well, that was a pretty terrible film," Aunt May said.

Peter sat back in shock. It was bad enough that she hadn't gone to see it at the cinema when he was gone, but now she was bashing it? Was she really talking about *Rise of Skywalker*? "How can you say that?! It's Star Wars, it can never *not* be good!"

Aunt May yawned. "I'm going to agree to disagree with you on that one. I could barely keep my eyes open."

Peter's mouth dropped open and she let out a laugh, pulling him into a hug against her. Peter enjoyed the warmth of her arms around him: she felt like home to him. They hadn't had much time together lately; he tried to co-ordinate his Spider-manning to when she was at work, but it didn't always work out that way. He also had school work and preparation for academic decathlon to contend with – being unprepared for that would bring the wrath of MJ down on you, and that was not something he wanted to face. It was rare that they would get the chance to spend time together without Alfie around, but it was fated today; a Saturday when Alfie had a play date with another kid in the building and May wasn't working until tonight. Peter realised that he'd better enjoy these moments while he could, as the new baby – or Splodge as he kept referring to it - would be here soon.

Kevin came out of their bedroom then and stopped, seeing them on the couch. Peter was glad that he hadn't wanted to watch the film. He couldn't relax around him after the incident the other day. Peter was avoiding him as much as he could; staying out of the house up until curfew whenever it was just Kevin around. Kevin hadn't stepped to him again, other than a nasty comments from time to time.

"Love, you look exhausted. Don't you think you should have a proper nap before you go to work later?" Kevin said, his eyes focused on May.

Peter tried not to roll his eyes at that – her tiredness was partly Kevin’s fault. He’d heard the two of them arguing late last night; the curse of super-hearing. He’d been on standby, ready to intervene if Kevin turned nasty. Now Peter knew he had that capability, he wouldn’t put it past him. But the argument hadn’t been heated: not in an aggressive way. He could hear enough to make out that the new baby had certainly not been planned and that money was the main topic. He’d heard Kevin say that Peter should get a job and May tell him that Peter’s focus should be school. Maybe he should be getting a job? Being a burden was something that’d always worried him since he came to live with Ben and May – something the passage of time had not ebbed away.

May yawned again. “Can’t I just stay here and use Peter as a human blanket?” She squeezed him closer to her again and it pushed a smile to his lips.

“You could, but I’m not sure your back will thank you later.”

May let out a grumble. “You’re right. I’ll just sleep for a bit.”

Peter shifted his weight off of her so she could move, and she planted a quick kiss on his forehead and then one to Kevin’s lips before she headed down to the bedroom.

Kevin was still stood, leaning against the wall after she left, and Peter stayed on the sofa, not wanting to have to step near him to get past.

“Does she know?” Kevin’s cold voice projected into the space.

Peter looked up; his eyes briefly flicking to Kevin’s and away. “Does she know...what?” He crossed his fingers – please can this not be about Spider-man. Please can *he* not know about Spider-man.

“Does she know that you let her husband die?”

Everything in the room stopped for Peter – including his heart. Well no, that wasn’t true, as the sound of it thrumming filled his ears.

“I...I...” He could only stutter.

Kevin pushed off the wall, stalking closer.

“I looked up the police report. Ben was out looking for *you*. *You* let the robber go by. It said you were with him when he died, but you didn’t even call 911 yourself, you just sat there and cried while he bled out.”

Peter felt like his chest was going to explode. Kevin took a step closer and dropped his voice lower.

“You think that she’d want you here if she knew? You think she’d be hugging you then? I should tell her really, but it would break her heart, wouldn’t it?”

Peter couldn’t form words: all he could feel was a pressing weight on his chest and a tightening on his throat, like fingers wrapped around it.

Kevin shook his head at Peter with a look of disgust before turning and heading back down the corridor.

He had to get out of here, he had to breathe. He stumbled around the sofa and out of the front door. His instinct took him to the roof as the panic began to hit him. Air, he needed air. The cool breeze wasn’t helping though and he managed to still his shaking hands enough to pull up his phone and press a number.

Tony’s smiling face filled the screen. “Underoos...hey what’s wrong?”

“Can’t...breathe...”

Tony’s face switched to a serious expression. “Peter, it’s ok, I think you’re having a panic attack. Sit down.”

Peter crumpled onto the concrete floor; all he could picture was Ben’s contorted face and blood, blood, blood.

“You don’t need to see me, but just listen to my voice. Follow what I say. Touch the ground, what do you feel, is it hard or soft?”

Peter’s hands found the rough grit of the concrete and he pressed his fingers into it. “Hard.”

“Tell me two more things that you can feel.”

Peter groped his leg. “My jeans; my skin.”

“Good. Now listen, what can you hear around you? Three things.”

Peter’s ears didn’t have to strain to hear the cars beneath, some voices from the top floor apartment, a cat screeching a block away. “Cat...voices...cars.”

“Three things you can smell?”

“McDonald’s...soap...detergent.” Peter let out a shuddered breath that felt a little looser than the last.

“Now listen to my voice, we’re just going to breathe in and out together. In for 7 out for 11. 7/11, easy to remember, right?”

Peter still couldn’t talk, but he followed along as he listened to Tony’s counting. His breaths began to come a bit easier.

“Remember last weekend when we went fishing, how calm it was out there, the gentle breeze, calm enough to lull me to sleep.” Tony let out a low chuckle and it made another part of him relax; the shaking in his body starting to still. “Can you picture it?”

Peter squeezed his eyes shut. He could see it; remember how safe and content he felt next to Tony, how he’d wished to just stay there. A tear escaped down his face and he let out a shuddering breath.

“How are you breathing now buddy?”

Peter realised that he was breathing pretty normally now. He sat up and pushed the tears from his cheeks before he picked the phone up from where it had laid on his chest: Tony’s frown-filled face on the screen.

“Better, thanks.”

Tony’s brow relaxed.

“You wanna talk about what brought that on?”

Peter shook his head. There was no way he could tell Tony about what Kevin had said about Ben; about what Kevin had done to him. Tony would tell May and...then Kevin would tell May about Ben. She couldn’t know. He couldn’t bear for her to hate him. He’d lose her forever. He gulped down the sudden bile in his throat.

“I understand kid. I get them too. I might not be the best person to talk to about them, but I’m here if you want to,” Tony said, his eyes full of concern. “You had one before?”

Peter cleared his throat. “No, not really. Sometimes a little panicky after nightmares.”

Tony’s eyes crinkled again. “Nightmares too, huh?”

Oh no, he shouldn’t have mentioned the nightmares. He’d been having them since he got back. The Vulture, Thanos, watching Tony die again and again. The idea of talking to Tony about watching him die made him balk.

Peter averted his eyes, wishing he hadn’t video-called. “It’s nothing I can’t handle.”

“Uh huh,” Tony didn’t sound convinced. “Well, if it ever does become something you can’t handle, you know who to call, right? Day or night.”

Peter's stomach flipped. He wouldn't call Tony about the nightmares. No way. Tony was meant to be recovering, resting, not worrying about him.

"What are you doing for the rest of the afternoon? I could come and take you out somewhere."

"You're at the cabin."

"Ok, it might take a few hours, but I could dust off my suit and make it even quicker. Just don't tell Pep; I'm meant to be retired now." Peter smiled as Tony rolled his eyes.

The idea of hanging out with Tony filled him with joy, but he couldn't keep intruding in his family all the time. No matter what they said, he couldn't keep getting in the way of that.

"Thanks Tony, but I'm going to hang out with Ned."

There was a flicker of disappointment in Tony's face before he smiled again. "Sounds good. An afternoon with 'the guy in the chair'. Just tell him to keep his hands off my suit."

Peter grinned. "Will do."

"Bye kid – see you in a few days."

—

Peter didn't want to seem like he was lying to Tony, so he messaged Ned about meeting up, but he had a family thing all day. Ned's mum had continued to be clingy and after everything with his Dad, Peter could understand why.

He contemplated going back downstairs, but the idea filled him with dread. May would be heading off to work in a few hours, which would leave him alone with Kevin. There was no way he was going to do that. He pulled out his phone and tried the only other person who might put up with him.

PP : *Hey, don't suppose you are free today?*

MJ : *I'm at the park.*

PP : *Not to worry then.*

MJ : *No, loser, I'm at the park. Come meet me if you want.*

She added a link to exactly where she was, and Peter pocketed his phone and headed in that direction.

—

He found her on a bench, a pad of paper and a pencil in her hand. As always, she looked effortlessly cool. Her curly hair was swept back, and her long legs were tucked underneath her.

“Hi,” he said awkwardly, sliding onto the bench next to her.

“Hey.” She didn’t look at him as her hand flew across the paper.

There was a silence for a moment and he watched her sketch until he felt like he should speak.

“So, what are you doing?”

“What does it look like, dork?” She turned to him. Her penetrating gaze made him look away. “You look like you’ve had a day.”

“Um, yeah, not a great one so far.” He fiddled with the tie on his hoody: his whole body tensed as he waited for her to ask him why.

“Can I sketch you?”

“Um, I’m not so sure...about that.”

MJ rolled her eyes. “Talk about your shit day, or go to the movies? They are re-running films that we missed while we were gone for half price.”

She was giving him an opportunity to talk, but also an out. She wasn’t a big sharer of personal stuff. The most he’d gotten out of her pre-Blip was that she lived with her Mom and her Dad had bounced when she was a little kid. Both her and her Mom had blipped and were now living with her extended family – but like before the dusting, she rarely talked about home. It wasn’t like with Ned who would push for details of why he was having a bad day. Peter would definitely take the out today. An afternoon immersed in other worlds sounded amazing right now.

“Movies, definitely.”

“Predictable, Parker. Let’s go.”

—

It was almost 10pm by the time Peter got back to the apartment. The movies had been a great idea – he’d zoned out watching them and they’d picked exclusively comedies. He’d caught MJ laughing hard at a joke – the light from the movie screen making her eyes sparkle more – he was so used to seeing her impassive reaction to things that it was nice to see a different side of her. They’d followed it with a sandwich from Delmar’s and splitting a bag of jelly worms.

He’d walked around a bit after dropping MJ back at her place. He considered suiting up and heading out on patrol, but he still felt shaky after the panic attack and he knew he wasn’t in his right mind about it. As he put the key in the lock, he felt his heart rate increase; Kevin would definitely be there as Alfie would be asleep. His stomach did a flip as he opened the door to see Kevin sat over on the sofa, beer in hand and some old basketball game on the TV screen.

Kevin didn’t even bother to look in his direction and he took that as a good sign. He was tempted to go straight to his room, but he was starving. That one sandwich had not even hit the sides. He got a glass of water and opened the fridge. He heard Kevin moving behind him, coming in the direction of the bathroom, but his Spidey sense alerted him to the change in movement and he

pulled himself out of the way as Kevin slammed the fridge door shut.

“What the hell?” he yelled, his fingers barely missing getting caught.

“I’m pretty sure I told you on day one that dinner was at 6pm every night.” Kevin said, his blue eyes seeming to turn almost black. “If you don’t make it, you don’t eat.”

“I texted May to let her know I wouldn’t be home. She said it was fine.” Peter felt a surge of strength go through him. May wouldn’t want him to be hungry. He’d only opened the fridge again by a crack before Kevin’s hand gripped his upper arm; his fingers pressing deep into his flesh.

“This is my house. I’m in charge. You think she pays all the bills? The food bill alone has doubled since you got here.”

Peter gulped – he’d always felt guilty about how much he had to eat since he became Spider-man. Well, no, it had started much earlier than that. He’d always felt guilty about how hard Ben and May had to work to provide for him, when he’d just been dropped in their laps.

Kevin pushed him away and he clattered against the wall. “Get out of here.”

Peter retreated to his bedroom. What a prick. He paced around the small room calming his breaths. He needed to focus on something else; something to distract him from the ache in his arm and the gnawing of his stomach. Schoolwork. The assignment left was for Spanish, which was his worst subject by far. It didn’t have the same rules and logic that Maths, Science and Computing had, and he never felt confident in it.

“You won’t get better if you don’t practice.” Ben’s mantra came to him then. God, he couldn’t think about Ben right now, not after Kevin’s thinly veiled threat earlier. He pushed that out of his mind as he looked over the assignment. He had to record a video of himself saying some Spanish phrases and email it to his teacher. Ugh. He hated putting himself on video – but it was infinitely better than doing it in front of the whole class. He spent a few minutes practising but stopped as he heard the door to the bathroom lock. This was his chance. He snuck quietly into the kitchen, grabbed an apple and a protein bar, and ducked back into his room. He chomped through them quickly as he set up his phone on the table so it was at an angle where he could sit down and see his whole top half. Apparently Senor Kent found ‘talking heads’ off-putting.

He cleared his throat and began to talk.

“Um, Hola buenos dias Senor Kent. Mi nombre es Peter Parker. He vivido en Queens, Nueva York durante toda mi vida.”

The door burst open and he barely had time to push his chair out from the desk before Kevin pulled him out of it, the force knocking the chair over.

“I told you no.” Kevin shouted, spit dripping off of him as he threw Peter onto the bed and started laying punches into his stomach and side.

The shock started to wear off and he willed himself not to fight back; picking a place on the wall to focus on as Kevin exhausted himself. He didn’t want him to tell May about Ben. *Think of May, think of Alfie, think of the Splodge.*

Kevin grabbed him by hair. “I’m in charge, you understand?”

Peter nodded imperceptibly.

“Pussy.” Kevin spat. “You should’ve stayed dead.”

Peter

The overhead lights were really starting to bother Peter’s eyes: everything was just too bright today; too loud; too much. A throbbing headache had been in the centre of his forehead since he got up; probably a result of the shitty sleep he’d been having lately; nightmares and imagined noises keeping him from getting any real rest.

He’d limped his way through school; the noises there like nails on a chalk board. Now, even in the comparable quiet of the lab, his hands didn’t stay still when he needed them to: shaking almost imperceptibly. He picked up the wiring for the tenth time, and tried to attach it to the chassis of the Starkpad prototype he was working on. There was that slight shake of his hand again: he tried to

compensate for it with a little more strength and he knew that was a mistake a millisecond too late when the chassis broke in two.

“God damn it!” He slammed his fist onto the work table: leaving a sizeable dent.

Shit, shit, shit. He scrambled out of his chair and worked on pushing the dent back out.

“What the hell, Pete?”

Peter couldn't help but jerk at the cross voice.

“Sorry, I didn't mean to...” Peter manipulated the metal again without looking at what was sure to be an angry expression on his mentor's face.

“Leave it.” Tony was next to him now; the waft of his cologne irritating his already aching senses. A hand covered his.

Peter ignored him and carried on trying to fix it.

“Leave it, Roo.” Tony's other hand came up and cupped his face: turning it towards him, so he had no choice but to look at him.

Tony's hair was a mess, like it always was when he put in some hours in the lab: usually due to him dragging oil-slicked fingers through it when in thought. Peter's eyes settled on his face now; no anger there, just an expression of concerned confusion.

Peter let out a breath and released the table. “Sorry.”

Tony's arm snaked around his shoulder, pulling him away from his work table to face him.

“What's got you going all 'jolly green' on the equipment? Bruce won't like you taking his USP, you know?”

“I just can’t get the wire where I want it and then I snapped the chassis using too much strength. My senses have been playing up all day. Just; argh!” Peter let his head thunk onto Tony’s collarbone, leaving him to feel the vibration of Tony’s soft chuckle through his forehead.

“FRI, dim the lights to 30%. Temp to Spidey settings. Come on...caffeine time. For me, not you. We’ll never make that mistake again.”

Peter let Tony lead him to the couch and sat down as the man went over to the mini fridge. God, he was tired. He just couldn’t rest properly at home. Kevin was just always on him – using any small infringement as an excuse for his ‘discipline’. A smack round the head, a punch in the ribs. Horrible words and whispering insults whenever May left the room. His Spidey sense buzzed constantly when Kevin was nearby, despite the fact that he kept ignoring it and letting the man hit him. Despite the fact that he knew – *he knew* - that he could hurt Kevin, that he could kill him if he wanted – and boy, he thought about it – his body started to react in fear whenever he came near. He did what he could to avoid home when Kevin would be there. He patrolled as much as he could get away with. Lab days were his release; soaking in as much of Tony’s company and praise as he could get.

Tony came back with a water for him and another steaming cup of coffee for himself. He didn’t even have the energy to rib Tony for his caffeine intake like he always did.

Tony settled in next to him; his leg pressed against him. Peter closed his eyes and had slowly drank down half the bottle of water before Tony spoke.

“Come on then: spill.”

His whole body tensed: enough to cause an ache in his side where Kevin had kicked him and, at the very least, cracked a rib the other day.

“Spill what?” He kept his voice level.

“You’ve been off all afternoon. Well, not just this afternoon now I think of it. So, what’s going on?”

This was the moment. This was where he could just lay it all out, right? Things were getting worse at home. Somedays he was barely getting through school without falling asleep. He

couldn't talk to Ned about it – he had enough to deal with; and MJ, well, he didn't want to seem weak, not to her.

Tony could fix it, right? He'd sort it out, stop the pain. Deep down Peter knew that he'd do more than that – he would flip out. He didn't do subtle. He might even go after Kevin. Peter couldn't let that happen. Not for Kevin's sake - fuck that guy - but for Tony. Tony needed an easy life now – God knows he'd earned it.

And if he blew it all up; told Tony about Kevin's anger, where would that leave May? Would she leave Kevin? May, Alfie and the Splodge deserved to have a real family. Besides, May had been so ill with the pregnancy – Peter had been taking more and more care of Alfie so she could rest. What would they do if he wasn't there? What would Kevin do if he didn't have Peter to take his increasing anger out on?

Peter looked over to where Tony was waiting for his answer expectantly.

“May is pregnant,” he blurted out.

Tony's eyebrows showed his surprise first, followed by the rest of his face.

“She is...wow...” Tony watched Peter as he gave a tentative smile. “That is really great for her.”

Peter looked away: curling his fingers into his jeans. “Yeah, totally. Unexpected, she said, but she's happy.”

He felt Tony's eyes on him still.

“It's ok to feel uneasy about this, Pete. Lord knows you've had enough change lately.”

“Yeah, I'm fine...it's fine...” Peter paused aware that he didn't think he had ever said so many lies in one sentence. “...it will be...fine.”

“That's a lot of fines.”

Peter didn't know what to say but fished around for something. "I don't have a lot of experience with babies."

Tony let out a breath. "Yeah, I'm not going to lie to you, they are full on. Smelly, loud. But... best cuddles ever. And I know you like to hug." Tony's elbow jabbed him softly.

Peter forced a smile.

"Well, if you ever need to get away from the crying and pooping and what have you, you always have your room here. And you have us....especially since we are going to be moving back here full time from next week." Tony flashed him an excited grin.

"What?!"

"Yep, we decided the other day – we were going to tell you over dinner tonight. Pep is actually going to kill me for letting the cat out of the bag. She wanted to be the one to tell you..."

Peter felt like his heart was beating out of his chest. "Y-you're leaving the cabin? Why?"

"Better schools for Morgan, easier for work for Pep and I, and, of course, closer to our favourite superhero." Tony nudged him again.

Peter launched himself into Tony, wrapping his arms around him and squeezing his head to his chest. Tony let out a huff of breath at the impact, before Peter felt his hand rubbing up and down his back.

"I'm going to take that as a sign that you think it's a good plan?"

Peter nodded into his chest: he couldn't speak as he tried to control his emotions. Just having Tony closer felt like a lifeline. He didn't have to tell him, but he could pop by and just fill up on the love from the family; recharge his emotional battery; feel safe in the arms of someone whom he didn't feel a total burden to.

He buried his head deeper into Tony's warm chest as the rhythmic rubbing on his back started to ease the tension of the day. This would work: this would help him get through it. I mean, he was used to taking punches as Spider-man: he got injured all the time, he could cope with that. It would be worth it for everyone to get what they needed. He just had to keep going.

Chapter 12

Tony

Tony watched Pepper from his perch by the window. She tapped furiously on the computer in front of her; the papers stacked to her side being nudged by her elbow.

“Stop it,” she murmured without looking up.

“Stop what?” Tony asked, twirling his phone in his hand.

“Stop staring at me.” She looked at him then and raised an eyebrow. “I’m working. Do you need me for something?”

“No, I was just at a loose end.”

She typed aggressively again for a moment before looking at him with a frown. “Isn’t it a ‘Science Bro’s’ day?”

“Peter had to cancel again; said he had too much schoolwork.” Tony couldn’t help the grumble in his voice. “I offered him to come here and do it, but he said he had to baby-sit as well.”

“That’s a shame,” Pepper said, her eyes flicking back down to the screen.

“You know, other interns wouldn’t cancel on me. Maybe I should get someone else?” His tone was petulant.

“You don’t have any other interns and for good reason. None of them could handle you and none would be as smart as Peter. That would drive you crazy,” Pepper said.

“He likes to think he’s smart...” Tony said, stalking over to her desk and stealing a mint from the jar she always kept filled.

“It’s ok to admit that you miss him,” Pepper said with a sigh, “you’ve never been good at sharing.”

“You make me sound like a child.”

“And your point is?”

He stuck his tongue out at her and she smiled.

“Did you ask him about this weekend yet?” Pepper asked, half an eye on her screen. “I’d feel better if you had an extra pair of hands with Morgan.”

“Do you think I can’t look after my own daughter without you?” Tony meant it as a joke, but his voice might not have been as light as he intended as Pepper pushed herself from behind her desk and wrapped her arms around him.

“No, Tony. You’re more than capable. You are also, however, meant to be taking it easy. Clint asked about bringing him and despite whatever misconception you are hiding your feelings behind right now, Peter adores spending time with you. It’s a no-brainer.”

Tony felt any anxiety lessen; the kid did seem to like being with him. He’d been so happy when he’d told him they were moving in- had even helped them move their stuff in. Tony was just put out that he’d barely seen him since. But, he was a responsible kid – probably too responsible – which is why he prioritised school and family over the lab. Tony hadn’t had an ounce of that self-control at sixteen.

“I’ll ask him tomorrow,” he leaned in and gave her a long kiss.

“Will that be all, Mr Stark?” she asked as she stood and straightened up her dress.

“That will be all, Miss Potts.” He smirked back.

Peter

Peter finished webbing up the would-be robber just as the sirens were nearby. He webbed his way up to the roof and watched as the Police officers got to the guy.

“Karen send the footage of the crime to the local department.”

“Of course, Peter.”

“Hey Spidey.” Peter looked down to see one of the Police Officers smiling and waving.
“Thanks.”

Peter waved awkwardly. “Er, no problem. Happy... arresting!”

Peter zoomed away, enjoying the swinging more than usual. Any time out of the house when Kevin was home felt like true freedom.

He was mid-swing when Karen spoke. “Peter, Mr Stark is requesting a video call. Should I put him through?”

“Sure thing, Karen.”

Tony’s face flashed up; he looked like he was in the car.

“Hey Kid,” Tony smiled warmly at him, “whatcha doing?”

“Swinging on home.”

“That I can tell,” Tony made a face, “you’re making me feel seasick. Do me a favour and pop a squat somewhere?”

“No problem, hang on.” He was almost at the alleyway where he dropped his bag off anyway. He shot a few more webs to get there and dropped on to the roof.

“That’s better. How’s your day been?” Tony asked.

Peter checked the alley was empty and climbed down, landing by his bag which he quickly detached from the webbing.

“It was awesome; I’m pretty sure I aced that Physics quiz I was telling you about.” Peter unlatched his suit and wriggled out of it. “It was Pizza day at school, they didn’t have pineapple, but still.”

He grabbed his clothes out the backpack and pulled them back on as he spoke.

“Then on patrol, I helped a kid find his Mom and they cried, cos they were happy and then that made me...well...it was emotional. And I just caught a guy trying to break into a dog groomer’s, stopped him before he stole any dogs, or well, money he probably wanted...and a cop even said ‘Thanks’, so yeah, good day.”

Tony chuckled and Peter warmed at his laugh. He used to think his rambling irritated Tony but now he didn’t seem to mind it. The five years Peter had been away had mellowed Tony in certain ways and he’d be lying if he said he didn’t love the new level of intimacy they had.

“My God Parker, that is the worst of your pun t-shirt’s I’ve ever seen, and believe me when I say that there are a lot of contenders for that accolade...”

“What do you...?” Peter spun around and saw Tony at the end of the alley, leaning casually against the town car with a big grin on his face.

Peter ripped the mask off his face, shoving it in his bag and jogging over. Tony gave him a big hug and Peter’s heart thumped happily.

“What are you doing here?” Peter pulled away with a wide smile. “Besides tracking me through my suit, which is borderline stalking I might add.”

“Doing what I do best; giving fashion advice to teenagers.” Tony smirked. “Jump in, Pepper will have a field day if I get papped talking to you in an alleyway. I’ll drop you home.”

It was only a few blocks away, but Peter was happy to comply. He got into the back seat with Tony following behind.

“Hey Happy.”

Happy nodded but didn’t say anything.

“Happy is on full charm offensive today. He’s upset that he couldn’t get concert tickets he wanted for some Country artist.” Tony not so whispered.

“She is a rock icon actually.” Happy snapped, followed by a grumble of “three hours I was on the bloody phone...”

The car started moving into the usual New York traffic: so basically a snails pace at this hour.

“So, why are you actually here? Not that I don’t want to see you, but Queens isn’t exactly on the way to anywhere you like to go.”

“Can’t a mentor just drop in on his protege?”

“I am *not* your protege...” Peter raised his eyes brows with a smile.

“Aren’t you? Hmmm?”

“No, as I remember it, I was a well-established vigilante and you procured my help with a HR problem you were having.” Peter cocked his head. “I was gracious enough to help you out.”

Happy snorted from the front and Tony grabbed his chest in mock horror. “Oh, how you wound me, Spiderling.”

Peter grinned back enjoying the relaxed banter.

“Question for you – you busy this weekend? Don’t answer that. You are now. We are going to head over to see Clint and the family, and he expressly asked for your presence.”

“He did?” Peter didn’t know Clint all that well, but he liked his sense of humour. He’d met the whole family a few weeks back and they were all pretty cool.

“Well, in his own way. Sort of like *‘Hey Tony, you still coming up this weekend? See if the Spider-kid wants to tag along?’*” Tony did a terrible impression. “Clint doesn’t let many people come to his place. It’s strictly off the grid, he may make you sign an NDA, be warned. So, I’d take that as a warm invitation.”

“That would be awesome. He lives on a farm, yeah?” Peter sat forward excitedly.

“Oh, I forgot a city boy like you would be entranced by that.”

“It’s remote, right? Do you reckon we’ll be able to really see the stars out there?”

“Nerd,” coughed Happy.

“I love that you have literally been to space, but that still excites you. Yes, I think star spotting will be on the cards.” Tony ruffled his hair.

Peter smiled whilst trying to knock his hand away. “I’ll have to check with May.”

“Of course, Aunt Hottie will have to approve.”

“I’d really hoped that nickname had died with me,” Peter said with a pointed look from under his eyebrows.

“It was resurrected....” Tony said, with a mischievous glint.

The car pulled up outside of the apartment complex.

“You know you could’ve told me all this on the phone, right?”

Tony tsk-ed.

“He’s been moaning that you missed your ‘Science Bros’ days,” Happy piped up.

Peter coloured remembering why he’d had to miss the lab days. Since The Starks had arrived back in town, Kevin kept coming up with lists of things that he wanted him to do – babysitting, housework, errands. Trying to keep up with it all meant he was seriously behind on school work, so he’d had to cancel on Tony a few times. His energy levels were in the toilet – missing meals to avoid Kevin and nightmare-filled sleep not helping.

“Sorry about that. Just with school, Spiderman and looking for a job-”

“- A job?” Tony cut in. “Why do you need a job?”

“Kevin wants me to contribute to the house. And I want to as well, “ Peter followed up quickly. He didn’t really. Kevin had sprung it on him and May over dinner – his reasoning being that it’d be good for Peter to know responsibility. May had shot Kevin a look and begun to half protest, but Peter had gone along with it easily. Money would be tight when she had to go on maternity leave in a few months and he didn’t want her worrying about that. He also didn’t want her fighting with Kevin over him. And, to top it off, at least then he’d have a valid reason to be out of the house. “I’m old enough now.”

“You already have a job.”

“I can’t pay him in Churros, Tony,” Peter deadpanned.

Tony smiled softly at the memory. “I meant with me.”

Peter fiddled with his bag strap. “Oh, I don’t think I ever officially made it onto the Avengers payroll, if there even is one. I mean, the suit is payment enough...”

“No, the internship,” Tony waved his hands and carried on when Peter looked clueless.

“I didn’t think that was on the books.”

“Well, now you can officially be my intern. You already help me with the Avenger gear and all those SI projects.” Tony shrugged.

“Yeah, but that is awesome, I learn so much. I can’t take money from you for it.” Peter shook his head.

“Stop being proud, and just say yes.” Tony levelled him with a ‘not-messing around’ look.

Peter hesitated. It would get Kevin off his back at least, and right now that would help a lot.

“Ok, but minimum wage.” He knew Tony would just throw money at him and that didn’t sit right.

Tony blanched. “You realise I pay my employees at least a living wage, not minimum wage, right?”

Peter crossed his arms. “Minimum wage, or I start applying to McDonald’s.” Peter was hedging his bets that Tony wouldn’t want Peter to be too busy to be able to come to the lab.

Tony threw his arms up. “Christ, you are a strange kid, but fine. At least this means you can’t cancel lab days anymore or the boss will get angry. I hear he is a real hard ass.”

“And that’s just the nice things they say,” chirped up Happy.

“You want to be demoted back to driver?” Happy made a disgruntled noise in response. Tony turned back to Peter. “You can start this weekend.”

“But you’re taking me away on a trip! You can’t pay me for that!”

“Pepper is working in Japan. So, you can help me with Morgan. We’ll call it babysitting,” Tony shrugged.

“I would do that for free anytime!”

“Noted,” Tony said, with a wry smile. “I’ll add you to the shortlist of trusted babysitters. Anyway, enough arguing about this. Check with May and don’t forget to pack your swimmers, Underoos.”

Peter would have rather spoken to May when they were alone but with it only being a two days away, and her schedule with work and Alfie, he could only do so over dinner, with Kevin looming.

“Hey May, um, Mr Stark asked if I could go away with him this weekend. He’s going to visit friends that have a farm and said I could tag along, if that was ok with you?”

“That’s nice.” May’s eyes crinkled. “Be good for you to get some proper fresh air.”

“Weren’t we talking about you taking your responsibilities more seriously not a few days ago?” Kevin said tightly. Peter hadn’t forgotten the smack around the head that had accompanied it.

“I can do my homework on the way there and back.”

“And what about job hunting?” Kevin held his knife up before cutting into his chicken.

“Actually, Tony offered to pay me for the internship at the Foundation. So, I can keep interning for that and helping him with his lab projects.”

“What a good idea-“ May was cut off.

“- I hope you told him no. Does he think we need his charity?” Anger was deep in Kevin’s voice. “He throws his money around and you just jump?”

Peter sighed. Kevin was never happy. He wanted Peter to contribute, when he found a way to, it wasn’t good enough.

“You wanted me to get a job and I did.” Peter said quietly, looking at him for just a second from under his eyebrows.

Kevin glared at him – his eyes sparked with rage.

“Peter is right, Kev. Tony isn’t like that – Peter was working with him for a long time before the Blip. He obviously values him. Why shouldn’t he get paid for what he does?”

“If I have to hear another thing about Tony bloody Stark, I’m going to lose my appetite.”

May was giving him a hard look. Peter still didn’t get it – this thing Kevin had against Tony. Tony, who literally died and was brought back to life saving the planet but Kevin, well, he hated him. Peter wasn’t going to say anything nice if he stayed here and he didn’t want to give Kevin extra reason to want to hit him later.

“May I be excused please?” Peter didn’t take his eyes off the ground.

“Yes – good idea sweetheart,” May said, sitting back and crossing her arms.

Peter didn’t get his door closed before he heard May start to argue with Kevin. He kept pressed up close to the door listening for any signs that Kevin might be getting aggressive with May. He thought his heart might have beaten an audible sound against the wood, it was hammering so hard. Thankfully it was largely one sided with May telling him that he’d wanted Peter to get a job for ages and now he had; and to get over whatever insecurity he had about Tony and support Peter. Kevin had grumbled something that sounded like a half-baked apology and then Peter heard the shift of some keys and the front door closing.

He heard May's footsteps a little too late and she caught his heel as she opened the door quickly. He hopped away and smiled with a wince at her.

"Guessing you heard all that, huh?"

Peter shrugged.

"I'm sorry he's like that. I think he's actually a little bit jealous." She pushed her hair behind her ears.

"Of my internship?"

"Of your relationship with Tony. I think, maybe when you first came back he thought, in his old-fashioned way, he might be more of a father figure to you. But I think that spot is quite firmly taken." May gave him a soft look.

Peter was confused of her assessment. That might be what he projects to her, but he only ever treats Peter, at best, like an inconvenience. As for Tony being a father figure, well, yes that was true. There was a time when he would have felt guilt about that – that he was betraying Ben who had been his father in every way that counted, and the only one he could remember. But things had changed; between incidents with the Vulture and Titan, and the last few months since the Battle of Earth had completely changed their relationship. Peter didn't really mind being called his protégé one bit.

May misunderstood his pause. "That's ok, I don't want to change that. Lord knows I didn't care for Tony after I found out about...everything...but over time he's changed and it's obvious he cares about you. It's good for you both." She smiled at him and pulled his hand into hers. "It's just, if you could try to find a bit of space in your big old heart for Kevin, well, that would mean a lot to me."

Peter forced a smile, hoping his utter revulsion didn't show. She wouldn't be saying that if she knew everything. Maybe now was the time to just tell her. To end this farce once and for all.

Maybe lead with something like; *"Sorry May, my heart is shut to abusive asshats who get their kicks out of hitting people smaller than themselves?"*

But then there was a shout from the bathroom from Alfie; she kissed his cheek and was gone before the words could even form on his lips.

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“Peter...Peter.”

Peter woke to the insistent whisper of his name to see Kevin standing over his bed. He flinched seeing him, but before he could move Kevin’s fist pummelled into his stomach three times; a hand covered his mouth in a painful grip, stopping the garbled cries filling the room.

He kept his hand on Peter’s mouth as he spoke, “Don’t get in-between me and my wife again.”

He was gone closing the door carefully so as not to make a noise.

Peter curled up, his stomach throbbing, and let out a whimper into his pillow.

Peter’s spidey sense was off the scales. Being in a small, enclosed space with Kevin was exhausting it.

May had insisted that Kevin wanted to drop Peter to the airport, despite Peter saying he was absolutely fine making his own way. It was hard to say no to May when he had no reason to refuse that wouldn’t make him look like he was being obstructive to her ‘happy family’s’ fantasy. So, they had both waved her off with a big smile, which ended as soon as she was out of sight.

It’d been quiet all the way, Peter was exhausted enough that he could have slept if his spidey sense would let up. He hadn’t slept much the last two nights, thinking he heard the door open and Kevin coming. He’d kept startling awake, waking up with sweaty sheets and so, so tired.

Kevin huffed again as they stopped once again behind a refuse truck.

“Fucking traffic,” Kevin’s angry voice echoed in the car suddenly. “We’re going to miss the flight at this rate, and I’ll have to put up with your mopey ass all weekend.”

“We won’t; they’ll wait for me,” Peter said evenly, looking out of the window.

“Yeah sure,” Kevin snorted, “they’ll change their whole schedule just for you.”

Peter gritted his teeth but said nothing.

They turned off at the exit to the private airstrip a little while later. As they pulled up to the gates, Peter saw Happy, tablet in hand at the guard station.

“Not this fucking creep again,” Kevin’s voice was laced with venom. “He kept turning up to see May; bringing you up all the time so she couldn’t move on.”

Peter remembered Tony mentioning that Happy had checked up on May while he was living in the cabin. Peter had just thought he meant a phone call or something. A warm feeling settled in his stomach as Happy started to approach the car.

Kevin rolled down the tinted windows, leaning his muscled arm on the opened window.

Happy’s usual grimace deepened a little as he got to the window. Before Happy could say anything, Kevin spoke.

“Sorry we’re late, the kid hadn’t bothered to pack until this morning. Did we miss it?”

Happy’s brow furrowed for a second before he caught Peter’s eye and smiled – well as much as Happy ever did. “Not a problem; no way that plane was gonna leave without Peter on it. You can pull your car into the first hangar on the left.”

Screw you Kevin. Peter suppressed a smile as the barrier rose and they pulled onto the tarmac.

Peter notice Kevin's eyes widen as they pulled into the hangar where Tony's impressive private jet was stood in all its glory. "What a show-off."

Peter was tired of his negativity about Tony. He was a nobody compared to Tony. Which was probably Kevin's problem. Money didn't even enter into it: he knew he was no match for him in any way.

Peter started to open the door and hissed as Kevin gripped him tightly by the upper arm and pulled him closer, what he was doing hidden by the dash and the tint of the windows.

"You think you're something now, cos you have these rich assholes waiting on you?" His dark eyes were too close. Peter instinctively tried to move away, but the grip tightened, and it felt like five knives being pushed into his arm. "Well, you're not. You're just some pity project that they'll get bored of soon."

"No, they won't," Peter snapped back, pulling his arm out of the grip.

Kevin looked like Peter had told him to fuck off and Peter wished he actually had. He had half opened the door before Kevin reached across and grabbed him in a different spot, harder than before, sharp pain spiking up through him and pulling him back in the seat.

"Manners!"

It took longer than it should have for Peter to realise what he wanted. "Thank you for the lift." He pushed through his teeth and Kevin let go.

Peter has barely gotten his backpack out of the back, before the car started moving away. His throat was tight, but he won the battle to keep tears from his eyes as he began crossing the tarmac, the pain in his arm drumming almost in time with his gait. A smiling Tony, with Morgan in his arms, appeared at the top of the plane's stairs.

"Peter!" Her voice was full of joy at his mere presence. He needed to hear that after the last few days. He picked up his pace without realising and ran to greet them.

As soon as he got to the top of the stairs, Morgan all but threw herself from her Dad's arms to Peter's. Tony stepped back to let the now attached two-some into the plane, squeezing Peter on the shoulder as he went by.

“Morning Kiddo.”

Peter popped Morgan down and she took his hand and led him deeper into the jet.

“Woah,” Peter couldn’t hide his delight at the inside of the jet. It was all white leather seats and mini tables. “This is so cool!”

“Oh, yeah I forgot that you only got to see the outside of my old jet.” Tony gave him a smirk and Peter cringed as he remembered the jet that had gotten destroyed because he stopped the Vulture.

Tony must have seen his expression change. “Kidding. You saved the day remember, real hero stuff.”

Peter gave him a half smile. “I’m not sure you said that at the time.”

“Well, I say a lot of things. It’s one of my charms.” Tony clapped his hands together. “So, younglings, shall we get going? Don’t want to miss out on our taste of rural living.”

“Can Peter sit next to me Daddy?” Morgan asked, twirling Peter’s fingers.

“But where will I sit?” Tony looked bemused.

Morgan pointed to the furthest seat from them and Peter had to hide a laugh at how put out he was. Tony caught his eye and Peter could see the light in them.

“Come on Petey,” Morgan pulled him to a seat, chattering away until the plane started to taxi to the runway. He helped her get her belt on before his own and sat back into the comfortable leather of the chair. The throbbing in his arm was still there, rhythmic and low, but he focused on what Morgan was saying as the plane started to ascend.

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

A little bit of a fluffy interlude.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tony

“Boss, we are about to begin our descent.”

“Thanks FRI, uncloak us when we are below the treeline,” Tony replied, putting his phone down.

“Yes, Boss.” The AI’s voice responded.

Tony looked over towards the kids. Morgan had surprisingly stopped chattering to Peter after five minutes on the plane when she realised this was her chance for screen time - Peppa Pig being more of a pull than even Peter was. Peter was sprawled in the chair, deeply asleep, the Chemistry textbook open on his chest rising up and down as he breathed. Tony had hoped they might get to talk on the plane, but the kid had passed out pretty quickly. That wasn’t a bad thing; he’d noticed how tired Peter looked as he walked over to the plane. He should have known better than to ask a teenager to get up early on a Saturday morning.

Tony glanced outside the window to see that they were rapidly approaching the trees. It had been a long time since he’d been out here; he had forgotten how beautiful and secluded it was. The farmhouse and assorted out-buildings stood to the left and there was an open flat field. At one end of the property was a small lake next to the start of the forest. The jet automatically turned to hover mode so it could place itself down on the ground with barely any jiggling, but it was obviously enough to wake Peter as Tony heard his sleepy voice.

“We’re here already?”

Tony turned to see him stretching into a yawn. “You were passed out for two hours.”

“Woah, sorry.”

“You don’t need to apologise for sleeping, but the snoring on the other hand...” Tony cocked his head with half a smile.

Tony and Peter managed to coax Morgan out of her Peppa Pig trance with news that they were here. Peter insisted on carrying all of the bags and it didn’t hurt Tony to let him. As they came down the walkway, Clint was halfway across the field to them, with Nathaniel at his heels. Morgan ran off towards Nathaniel and they immediately began running around in circles laughing.

Clint’s smile broadened as they got to each other. Clint threw his arm around Tony and slapped his back, the force just short of making him wince. “Good to see you man.”

“Peter.” He then reached out his hand to Peter who rearranged a bag to shake his hand.

“Hey Mr Barton, thanks for having me.” Peter looked like the awkwardly polite kid he’d been when Tony had first met him.

“You can call me Clint,” Clint said with a smile.

“Good luck with that. It took me years, and my almost dying, for him to call me Tony.”

Clint let out a laugh. “Here let me take one.” He gestured for a bag.

“No, it’s okay, I got it. You know super strength and all that,” Peter said with a smile.

“There has to be some perks to having a mutant teenager around,” Tony said.

“I’m not a mutant!” Peter burst out.

“You aren’t?” said Clint with a frown.

“No, I, um, got bitten by a radioactive spider.”

“Huh,” said Clint with a shrug, “that is infinitely less cool.”

The look on Peter’s face had them both laughing, and Tony could see Peter’s shoulders start to relax as they reached the house.

“Just chuck them in the hall and we can sit out on the porch. I made some homemade lemonade.”

The thought of this highly trained killer spending his morning squeezing lemons tickled Tony.
“Hidden talents, Legolas?”

“I have so many,” Clint said, without dropping a beat. “Take a seat. I’ll be right out.”

Tony let himself fall onto the porch swing and Peter joined him. Morgan and Nathaniel had seemed to tire of running and were now sitting in the middle of a sandpit a few feet away.

He pushed off the swing and they both swung in silence. There were no other sounds than the creaks of the swing, the house and the nature around them. The sun was out, and the sky dotted with pure white clouds. It had been a long time since he had been here and then it had *not* been a pleasure visit; it was nice to be here with no agenda other than to relax and shoot the breeze.

“This place is so peaceful.” Peter murmured next to him, echoing his thoughts. “I feel like I can really...breathe here.”

“There I was thinking that you city boys could only survive in smog,” Clint said as he came out: placing a tray of lemonade and cakes down on the coffee table.

“I lived at the cabin for four years!” Tony protested.

Clint levelled him with a look. “I bet you never swam in that lake.”

Tony waved him off.

“So, is it like part of the Avengers retirement package that you retire somewhere with a lake?!”

Peter quipped and they both chuckled. Peter then sat up a bit straighter. “A car’s coming.”

A few seconds later a car came into view, a way, way down the dirt road.

“Super hearing?” Clint asked and Peter nodded shyly at him.

“He makes a good guard dog,” Tony countered.

“That’ll be Laura and the kids back from the store.”

Peter looked over at Clint. “Do they know about...me?” Tony realised then that Peter hadn’t shown any of his unique abilities when they’d met up a few weeks ago.

“Laura figured it out. She won’t say anything to the kids, or anyone else. We get the need for privacy.”

Tony watched Peter take this in with a nod of his head. “Thanks.”

“Yeah, and please, if you decide to go public one day, then no tacky ‘*I am Spider-man*’.”

Peter burst out laughing and Tony feigned displeasure.

The car pulled around the house and parked right next to the porch. Clint’s eldest son Cooper leapt from the car like a bullet from a gun and Tony heard the screen of the side door slam. Laura was out next.

“Cooper, wait...Cooper!” She called, looking exasperated.

Clint was up and moving towards her. “What happened?”

“He got into a fight with some kid outside the store.” She rubbed her forehead as she started to

walk towards the house.

Clint held his hand out as he started to go towards the door. "I'll go."

Tony got up as Laura came over, her cheeks tinged pink. "Gosh, Tony, I'm sorry about this."

Tony kissed her cheek. "Don't mention it. You remember Peter?"

Peter came over at this, waving awkwardly.

"Of course," Laura gave him a quick kiss on the cheek.

"Hi Mrs Barton," Peter said. "Thank you for having me to stay. Oh, wait I have something."

Peter ran to his bag and came back with a card and a box of chocolates. This kid was way more thoughtful than he would've been at that age.

Laura's face bloomed into a smile. "Aw, you are too sweet."

Peter's head turned back towards the house and a few moments later Tony heard voices growing closer. He heard Clint's deep tone – "*Just tell me who it was*". Then followed by Cooper's as he came out of the front door, "*Just leave it alone.*"

Tony watched as Cooper stomped off towards the forest. Clint came out and watched his son walk away with his hands on his hips and a frown on his face.

"Let me help." Tony turned at the voice to see Peter heading over to where Lila was standing at the back of the car getting grocery bags out of the back.

"That's very kind Peter," Laura said, before bumping Tony with her hip and talking under her breath, "is he always this polite?"

“Annoyingly so,” said Tony, before turning his attention elsewhere. “Miss Lila Barton, get on over here and say hi!”

Lila, all long, dark hair and braces, ran over and gave him a side hug. “Hey Mr Stark.”

She went back to grab a bag and Tony thought he better had as well, before he was totally shown up by the kid. He followed Lila inside the house where Laura and Clint were unpacking things like a well-oiled machine.

“Just put them down anywhere, thank you,” Laura said.

“Lila honey, why don’t you show Peter around?” Laura opened the freezer and pulled out an icepack. “But before that, see if your brother will take this. If he doesn’t want company, just leave him though...”

Lila took the icepack from her Mom and gave Peter a shy smile. “Follow me.”

Tony watched the teens disappear. “I’ll check on the littlies.”

“Cheers Tony,” replied Laura with a weary smile. Clint didn’t say anything as he moved around the kitchen, his face set in thought.

Tony walked back out to the porch and sat on the step; the two youngest kids still set on whatever it was they were trying to create in the sand. Although she was younger, Morgan was most definitely in charge, telling Nathaniel where to put the next shovel of sand. He smiled to himself; she was most definitely her mother’s daughter.

He heard the door open and then Clint sat next to him, exhaling as he sat down.

“They’ve not moved an inch, huh?”

“Nope. Building a new world takes dedication it seems.”

There was a pause for a second. Tony had never been one for avoiding confrontation and he wasn't going to start now.

"So, are we doing that thing where we don't acknowledge something has happened, or what?"

Clint sighed. "Laura said she sent him to take the cart back and next thing she knows he is fighting with some kid she thinks is from school. Won't say who it was or what it was about."

"Bullies?" Tony asked, sitting back.

Clint shrugged. "I dunno. He's been miserable since he went back. His three best friends, none of them blipped. Sure, they were happy to see him when he first came back, but now...I mean they're in college. One of them even has a kid..."

"Yikes." Tony cringed at the thought – imagining Peter having a kid in a few short years. "That must be tough for him."

"Yep. School say he doesn't try to make friends; that he is falling behind in some classes." Clint rubbed his hand over his face. "I mean, I barely went to school, but I wanted something better for them."

Tony nodded; feeling like a ball had thumped into his chest. He knew that feeling well. His eyes flicked in the direction Peter and Lila had gone.

"I had a bit of an ulterior motive asking Peter to come this weekend. They seemed to get on pretty well at the cabin last month. And he hasn't been like that with anyone since..." Clint threw his hands up in a weak gesture.

"...and Peter blipped too so he might relate." Tony finished his thought.

Clint shrugged. "He won't talk to us and I figured it couldn't hurt. I don't really know Peter, but he seems like a good kid."

Tony had forgotten that he didn't know much about Peter. Their first experience meeting each

other had been on in the field in Germany – when they were on opposite sides. His stomach turned when he thought about the mistakes he'd made with the Avengers, but also in bringing Peter into harm's way.

“He is. You know, he makes stupid mistakes sometimes, but his heart is always in the right place.”

Clint knocked his shoulder. “Sounds like he is taking after you.”

Before Tony could respond, Morgan thumped into Tony, followed by Nathaniel into Clint and a fit of giggles from both.

“Can I show Morgan my toys now Dad?” Nathaniel asked.

“Sure thing,” said Clint, standing up and letting the gruesome twosome barrel past him. “Must be late enough for a beer now, right?”

Tony smiled and followed him inside. “It's six o'clock somewhere.”

Peter

Peter couldn't get over how quiet it was out here. He could still hear everything, but that everything now included the water in the lake, the rustle of the wind through the trees and chirps from different species of birds. His head had been so busy with Kevin's voice – he hadn't imagined near-silence would be the thing to block it out.

Lila was telling him about the baby chickens that had hatched that they could show Morgan later. Peter's heart skipped – he had never held a baby chick before – but he didn't think it sounded cool to say that he was most excited about that.

As they approached the water, Peter could see Cooper sat on a felled tree with his back to them, looking out over the water. His shoulders were hunched over.

They must have gotten close enough to hear them, as he turned around, giving Peter a look at the tear tracks on his cheeks, the split lip and puffy eye. Cooper turned quickly back to the water and Peter saw him wipe at his face. Cooper threw his legs back over the tree this time, so he was facing them.

“Hey Peter,” Cooper said, looking quickly in his direction and away again.

“Hey,” said Peter lightly.

“Mom asked me to give you this.” Lila stuck out the ice pack to him.

“I don’t need it,” Cooper grumbled.

“It will help, trust me,” said Peter gently, thinking about how much spilt lips stung.

Cooper tensed for a second before shrugging and taking it off Lila. He pressed it to his face and grimaced.

Peter looked around the area, not wanting to put too much attention on Cooper, when he would probably rather they didn’t stare at him.

“Your place is unreal. You have, like, a forest in your garden. Is that a tire swing?” That looked like fun.

Cooper smiled out of the corner of his mouth that wasn’t covered with an icepack. “Yeah, it swings right over the water.”

“Dad put it up for us. Mom said we could go swimming after lunch.” Lila’s voice went high as she sounded more excited.

“That sounds awesome.” He bet he could do some awesome flips off the tire. The temperature was starting to increase and the idea of swimming in the cool water was enticing.

“So, what else do you do for fun around here?”

Cooper looked at Lila and they both gave him a mischievous smile.

He was pretty sure he was going to be sick. Right here, all over Cooper. Cooper turned the ATV tight around a cone and Peter let out a shriek. Through his tight grip on his waist, he could feel Cooper's chuckle. Peter decided he must be a secret sadist as he felt the vehicle pull forward, faster again. Before he could let out another yelp, the vehicle lurched and started to slow down.

“Aw crap.” He heard Cooper exclaim.

As soon as the vehicle came to a stop, Cooper jumped off, leaving Peter to slide off, his legs feeling a bit shaky.

“Dad! Dad! I think the motor's gone again.” Cooper called over to where Clint was sat with Tony a few feet away. Clint got up and started to come over.

“I'm sure me and Tony can fix it,” Peter said, excited at the prospect of doing something he was good at. He reached out to open the cover and pulled his hand back sharply as it got burnt. “Ow.”

“Not while it's hot, idiot,” called over Tony, shaking his head at him.

“You hurt?” Clint arrived behind him, reached for his hand and Peter took a step back instinctively.

“Um, no,” he felt his cheeks heat. He held up his hand where there were small red dots on the tips of his fingers. “See.”

Clint's eyes raked over him briefly before shrugging. “Fair enough. So, are you going to be getting a taste for ATV's now?”

Cooper snorted. “Couldn’t you hear him scream from over there?!”

“Hey!” Peter pushed him playfully. “But um, no, I won’t. Not that it isn’t cool what you’ve set up, Mr Barton. The training area is awesome.”

There was a whole area set out with cones and raised areas for them to practice driving. Peter’s eye caught a trio of archery targets over by the barn.

“Is that where you train?”

Clint’s eyes lit up. “Sometimes, but those are mainly Cooper and Lila’s.”

“That’s so cool!”

“You want a go?”

“Seriously?! Yes!” Peter bounced up and down. “I’ve never shot an arrow.”

Clint looked almost offended as he turned to Tony. “Stark, you haven’t been teaching this kid the important stuff?!”

“Not my wheelhouse, bird boy.”

Clint chuckled. “Lila, go get three bows. Coop-”

“- It’s not in my wheelhouse either,” Cooper’s voice cut in, sounding almost bitter.

“He just doesn’t like archery, because I’m better than him,” Lila said with a smirk, as she came back with the equipment.

“Are not!” Cooper protested, sending her a dirty look.

“Sounds like a challenge to me...” said Clint.

“Clinton!” Laura’s warning carried over from where she was helping the kids paint.

“Dare you.” Lila stuck her tongue out and Peter watched Cooper’s jaw set as he stood up and picked up a bow.

Clint showed Peter the basic mechanics and talked to him in a low voice about the best way to hold the bow. Peter listened intently, wanting to make sure he took it all in, trying not to get distracted by the sound of Lila and Cooper’s practice; arrows whizzing through the air. They were behind him, shooting from a further distance.

“Right, so spread your stance a little, toe pointed forward,” Clint said, moving around him, “and then draw the string back.”

Peter moved into that position and pulled his arm back. He could feel the tension on the string, but it wasn’t difficult.

“Just lift this elbow a little higher,” Clint moved it up, inadvertently pressing into one of the fresh bruises left by Kevin. The wince was involuntary, and he saw Clint notice it.

“How is this now?” Peter asked.

“Looking good. When you are ready, take a breath and let it go.” Clint stood back.

Peter looked along the string and he could see the bullseye in his sights. He knew that he’d be able to hit it. It might seem like beginners’ luck or...well, not worth the risk for his pride’s sake. He adjusted slightly and let go, causing the arrow to hit the outside white ring of the target.

“Hey! You hit it first time!” Lila exclaimed.

Cooper even looked impressed. Oops, maybe he should have missed.

“Nice one Parker, but remember that *we* are nerds, and this is starting to look a little bit too much like sport.” Tony’s called from behind and he turned to shoot him a smile. He was hanging the kids’ paintings on the line to dry, with Laura behind him tidying up the paints.

“Go get your arrow and keep practicing while I get the competition going over here.”

Peter had a few more goes, letting himself edge closer to the middle with each one.

He stopped to watch the final arrows being released by Lila and Cooper. Both of them had hit the middle of their targets and Clint ran over to see who was closest to the centre. He pulled them out and walked back to them, standing next to his two kids.

“The winner is Miss Lila Barton.”

“YES!” Lila jumped up and down and Cooper groaned.

“Lila, be gracious.” Clint said and she stopped. He then raised his eyebrows at his son. “You too Coop.”

Cooper stuck his hand out. “Well played, sis.”

They shook and Peter watched as Clint put an arm around them both and said something that had the three of them laughing. It was nice seeing them together. It was plain to see that they were really close: obvious how at ease they were at home. His throat felt tight as he thought about how life at home with May used to be; light and warm and happy.

“Lunch is up!” Laura called from the kitchen. Tony started ushering Morgan inside.

“Here, I’ll put them away. Take Nate in,” Clint took the bows off them and they headed inside; Lila scooping Nate up on the way.

Peter started walking back towards Clint who had his back to him and was sorting out the equipment on the floor.

Peter got as far back as he could and spun around. Fitting an arrow and lifting the bow in one movement, he let it loose and watched as it thumped into the bullseye.

“Holy shit!” Peter turned to see a wide-eyed Clint, who evidently had seen what he’d done. His eyes flicked around making sure the others were still inside before giving him a shy smile.

“Beginners luck?”

Peter could see the sun glistening off the water as he made his way to the lake. The sun was really beating down now and he felt like it was sending warmth through his body and out the other side. As he got closer to the lake, he could see there was a lowered area, almost like a beach, into the water, and trees hung out over the edge; one with the tire swing he was excited to try. There was a large picnic table with a big cooler placed on top; a few sun loungers and some blankets on the grass covered with a parasol.

He’d been slow getting changed so everyone was already there. Morgan ran over when she saw him and insisted on holding his hand to ‘show him the way.’ She had a little streak of sun lotion on her nose, which made her look even cuter. He rubbed it in and tapped her nose with his finger, causing her to give him a smile that would have melted ice caps.

Clint was chasing down Nate with a bottle of sun cream; Cooper and Lila were doing their own; everywhere their bathing suits weren’t touching.

Peter reacted quickly as a bottle of sun cream hurtled towards his head courtesy of Tony.

“You too, Parker. If you get burnt, Aunt May will kick my butt.”

“Will she Daddy?” Morgan asked.

“Oh yes, she is very scary.”

Morgan looked wide eyed at him. “Is she mean to you Peter?”

“No, she’s not, she is lovely.” Peter shook his head at Tony who only laughed.

He put some cream on his face and legs; but the rest of him was covered.

“Aren’t you hot?” Lila commented on the rash vest that Peter was wearing.

He really was, but the bruise from two nights ago was still there; snaking up from his hip towards his belly button. It looked much better than yesterday – left now was a yellow centre with purple edges. They should be gone by now. But then again, he hadn’t slept much since he got them; worried about Kevin’s reappearance and had skipped meals avoiding him. When he was getting changed, he could see distinct, round bruises above his elbow and upper arm, gained from Kevin’s grip, standing out prominently against his white skin. He was sure he could make up an easy lie about it happening on patrol to the adults, but what would he tell the kids? Lying wasn’t something he found easy, even though it seemed he was getting better at it. And he was already keeping a lot from people he loved as it was. He was glad that he’d thought to bring the old rash vest that May said had once belonged to Ben, when he had fancied himself a surfer one holiday long before Peter was around. He never quite imagined he’d be using it for reasons like this.

“I’m cold blooded,” he shrugged, “and I’m betting it’s freezing in there.”

Lila conceded that with a smile.

“Hey Parker!” He looked up to see Cooper now sat in the branches of a tree. “Wanna see who can climb a tree the fastest?”

Cooper dropped himself down quickly and Peter could now see he took after his Dad with acrobatic skill.

“I don’t think that would be fair...” Peter said without thinking. He saw both Tony and Clint’s faces tilt to the side; Tony’s eyebrow raised. He stumbled for justification. “...because, um, you know, I’m older than you.”

“Barely!” Cooper laughed. “Come on, I dare you.”

“Dare, dare, double dare,” Nate started singing, even though he wasn’t even looking in that direction.

Well, a dare is a dare. Peter followed Cooper over to a tree. He looked up it. It was a fairly tall tree, but nothing like the skyscrapers that he usually scaled. He would have to use his hands rather than his spider-enhanced fingertips like he did as Spider-man.

“Dad, count us off,” Cooper shouted out.

“3, 2, 1, Go.”

Cooper shot up the tree getting on to a lower branch and beginning to climb. Peter found his footing on the other side and began climbing, trying really hard to rely only on his hands. He caught up level with Cooper fairly quickly, who glanced across and looked surprised to see Peter just below him. Peter stayed close, but held back as they neared the top and then smiled as Cooper reached the top just before him and whooped.

There was a cheer from below. The two of them scaled back down. Morgan ran over to him and gestured to be picked up. Once settled in his arms, she leant over to him and cupped her hand around his ear to whisper. “Why didn’t you just use your Spider powers?”

He looked around but no one else was close enough to hear.

“Well, for one, that wouldn’t be fair. And I only use them to help people who are in danger.”

“And at my house?” He remembered how last time he had gone over, she was sad about something so he had hung upside down from the ceiling and swung her around to make her laugh.

“Yes, just for you, and only you, though. Your Dad did say about how important it is to keep it a secret, right, even from some of our friends?” She nodded with a very serious look on her face. So serious he struggled not to smile. “Not even my cousin Alfie knows.”

“Really? Oh.” That seemed to impress the importance of it. “I won’t tell anyone Petey.”

She placed a kiss on his cheek and hugged him. He felt a surge of love go through him. He started to spin her around and she began giggling.

“You wanna ask Daddy if we can go swimming now?”

“Yes!”

He looked up to see that Tony was watching them with a tender expression. He carried her over to where the man was lounging on a blanket.

“Daddy, can we go swimming now?”

Tony looked at Laura who gave him a smile.

“I reckon.” Tony started to move but Morgan put her hand out.

“Can Peter take me?”

Tony pretended to get shot through the heart and laid back on the ground, much to Morgan’s amusement. He sat up. “Ok – but put your floaties on.”

“Daddy is so silly,” Morgan said as she took Peter’s hand again.

“He sure is,” said Peter, looking back at him with a grin.

Chapter End Notes

Too much fluff, do you think?

Don't worry, more gritty stuff coming up soon!

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Peter

The tire swing was as epic as he'd hoped it would be and the water just as cold. They'd all scarfed down so much BBQ that even Peter was started to feel a bit sick.

He and Tony spent a few hours setting up some new tech that he'd brought along. Turns out Clint, like Tony, liked to be 'off the grid' in name only, and keeping an eye on the world was still as much in his mind now he was retired as it always was. Lila and Cooper were most excited by the Wi-if upgrade Tony sorted.

Once Nate and Morgan had been put to bed, the teenagers had gone to the barn to escape the parentals, who were watching an old movie whilst opening Tony's gift – a bottle of old, expensive Scotch.

In one corner of the barn, there was an old beaten up couch, ping pong table and TV. Peter set up a film to stream from his phone, but they were all sat on the couch not really watching it and looking at videos online.

"Hey, have you seen this one with the goat?" Cooper said, holding out his phone.

"Ooh yeah, that is a good one," Lila said, flicking through her own phone.

Cooper shifted closer to him, leaning against his shoulder and they both held one side of the phone up. Just as the goat started to chase the person video recording it, a notification dinged on Coopers phone.

"My mom is pissed at me. I'm going to kick your ass, Barton."

Then another: a different name; *"Count me in."*

And another from a different number, “*And me, ha ha.*”

Copper quickly swiped them away and sat up, his face flashing red.

“That the guy from today, threatening you?” Peter ventured.

Cooper looked more uncomfortable but shrugged.

Lila sighed. “Are they messaging you again? I wish they’d just get over it and leave you alone.”

“Get over what?” Peter asked.

Cooper stuck his hands in his pockets and sighed. “Apparently I stole this kid’s place on the Gymnastics team when I blipped back. Not really my fault that I was better than him.”

“That sucks. He’s been picking on you since?”

Cooper shrugged so Peter took that to mean a big, fat yes. “I don’t usually rise to it, but he said some shit about my family, and I got mad. He sucker punched me.” Peter saw him touch his eye which had blackened slightly over the course of the day.

“Is this all hot air?” Peter gestured to the phone, feeling a surge of protectiveness. “If they are planning three on one, then you might want to stick close to your friends.”

“What friends?!” said Lila.

“Screw you Lila,” Cooper’s eyes were dark. “I have friends...”

He looked back at Peter; a flush of red in his cheeks.

“Kind of. My best friends didn’t blip, so...”

Peter's stomach flipped. He was so lucky to have Ned and MJ still around to keep him sane.

"That really sucks."

"Like, Dad is all like 'make new friends' and 'be glad that you are here at all', but they don't get it. I mean I *am* glad, and thankful to Auntie Nat..." His voice wavered then. "And to Tony. It's just, everything has changed and not all of it's good."

Peter felt his stomach tighten in recognition.

"Tell me about it. I came back and my Aunt – who I live with - has remarried a *major* asshole, who would rather I didn't exist."

Both their faces dropped. "That blows."

Peter nodded, actually feeling better to have voiced it to someone for the first time.

"Only 1 and a half years til college, yay." Peter deadpanned.

Lila and Cooper both half-smiled at him and the tension in the room dipped a little.

"Dare you to play ping pong?" Lila said, with a grin.

After a few games that Peter won – not from his powers but that the others honestly weren't that great; he and Cooper were trying to see how long a rally they could get.

Lila came back in with her bow and set of arrows in her hand. Peter watched in between shots as she took something out and started putting it on the strings of the bow. Peter got the next shot but only just, and it went out of Cooper's reach. He turned to see what had distracted Peter. He rolled his eyes.

“What are you doing?” Peter asked.

“I’m waxing them,” Lila said, “it helps maintain the integrity of the strings.”

“Oh my God, you’re such a suck up. Dad’s not here, you don’t have to be his little clone.”

“Shut up. At least I don’t pretend to be bad at it, so Dad feels sorry for me and I can feel all edgy and ‘misunderstood’.” Lila rolled her eyes.

Cooper glared at her. “What would you know, Little Miss Perfect. *‘Oh, I don’t mind that my friend has blipped, I’m fine Mom, I’ll just be a robot my whole life and do whatever you say’.*”

Lila jumped up with her fists balled. “Shut up!”

“Come on then, if you aren’t just a goody two shoes, let me shoot the wood out of your hand.”

“I told you last week that was stupid...”

“You’re such a baby.”

“Shut up!”

Peter just stood still not knowing what to say to this whole exchange or if he should say anything at all. He never grew up with siblings, but he saw Ned and his sister arguing all the time.

“Wait, what is this?” Peter finally interceded.

“He wants to take a video of him shooting wood out of my hand,” Lila said.

“It would be epic,” Cooper said, and Peter couldn’t disagree with him on that.

Lila picked up her phone, clear that she wasn't going to engage.

"What about it, Pete?" Cooper turned to him with a smile.

"I don't think..."

"Come on! I can record it and send it to those douchebags and they'll know to never mess with me again," Cooper said, his tone sounding a bit more urgent.

The idea of shutting his bullies up was appealing to Peter, but something in his chest stopped him. Before he could say anything else, Cooper spoke.

"I dare you."

Peter stopped. Although he knew he shouldn't say yes just because it was a dare, the urge was there. He hadn't just let loose in so long. He'd been so tightly wound over the last few months; this weekend was the first time he'd really breathed. Besides, he didn't want to be the one who didn't do the dares today.

"Ok," Peter heard himself say.

Cooper whooped and grabbed the equipment, handing a pair of safety glasses to Peter before heading to the back of the barn.

"Grab a piece of that old panelling," Cooper gestured to a pile in the corner.

Peter slipped the glasses on and picked up the piece of wood, holding it as far away from his body as possible. He wasn't too worried, both of them hit the bullseye every time today and the piece of wood was much bigger.

"Lila, record it," Cooper said, excitement high in his voice. Lila rolled her eyes but did as asked.

He watched Cooper draw back the string, a slight flicker of nerves across his eyes before he settled into position and took in a breath. A millisecond before he let go, a ringtone sounded, and Cooper moved slightly while he released the arrow. Peter's senses made him move just in time and instead of imbedding in his arm, the arrow sliced cleanly through the top of his forearm. He wasn't sure if he heard Lila's scream before he felt the pain; it all seemed to happen at once.

The pain wasn't so bad; he'd been hurt way worse as Spider-man. He looked down to see blood dripping down his arm and he pressed his other hand to it to stop it. OK, so it *looked* pretty bad.

"Shit, shit, shit," he heard Cooper say as he arrived next to him; his hands hovering above Peter's arm in uncertainty.

The door to the barn burst open and Clint arrived with Tony on his heels.

"What the fuck?" Clint said, taking in the scene of a hysterically crying Lila, a frantic Cooper and a bleeding Peter.

"It's fine," said Peter, "it'll be fine."

Tony gripped him under the arm and started moving him. "First Aid kit?"

"Kitchen," Clint said, swooping down and picking the offending arrow off the floor, "you two as well." He barked at them.

As they crossed the yard, Laura opened the door and Peter saw her shock when she took a look at him. She held the door open and Tony guided him in.

"Kitchen table, Tony."

Clint cleared stuff off quickly and Laura reappeared with a box with a white cross on it. Clint pulled a chair over.

"It's honestly fine." Peter protested.

“Sit down, Parker,” Tony snapped and he did so instantly.

Clint appeared with scissors and in a swift motion cut a line up Peter’s top and then down the bloodied sleeve. Tony pulled the rest of the ruined shirt off. Peter realised that all the bruises he’d worked to hide today were now on show, but he figured they weren’t currently the main attraction.

Tony and Clint were leant over his arm.

“Right, take your hand away for a second,” Clint instructed.

Peter did as he was told, and another puddle of blood oozed to the surface and dripped out. He heard a cry from Lila who was pressed up against the wall; Cooper was next to her, his hands wrapped around himself and his face a deathly white.

Laura went over to Lila, running a hand down her arm. “Why don’t you two wait next door?” She said gently.

“No,” Clint’s hard voice made Peter flinch. “They can stay and see what they have caused.”

Tony looked over the wound before he pressed some gauze onto it and looked at the clock. “Put pressure on that and don’t take it off until I say.”

He turned to Clint. “It doesn’t look deep at all.”

“Did you pull it out?” Clint asked, looking at him directly for the first time.

“No sir, it just grazed across,” Peter replied quickly.

Clint grunted in a way that made it seem he was happy with that answer, but only partially. He picked up the arrow from the table and inspected it for signs, of what, Peter wasn’t sure. He seemed satisfied and put it back down. Clint then routed in the box and pulled out some antiseptic wipes, which he opened and started to clean the blood off of Peter’s arm.

“Should we go to the hospital?” Laura asked gently. “Will he need stitches?”

Peter shook his head. “I don’t think it’s that bad, in my experience...” He said those last three words very quietly. “...it should heal without needing them.”

“I’ve got some steri-strips and glue in my kit on the jet,” said Tony.

“We have some,” Laura stepped forward and found them quickly, passing them to Clint.

“Right, gently take the pad off and we’ll see if the bleeding has slowed,” Tony instructed.

Peter lifted it off and looked down at the bright, red 2-inch-long line on his forearm. Blood had stopped coming to the surface. He relaxed a little, realising this meant no stitches.

“Glue do you think?” Tony asked Clint.

“Definitely. Need to clean it first.”

He took out a fresh wipe and wiped it along the wound. It stung like hell and Peter sucked in a breath. Lila let out a whimper from the corner. Peter felt Tony’s hand on his shoulder giving him a gentle squeeze as Clint finished it off.

“I’m not so good at the delicate things,” Clint said, handing the surgical glue to Tony.

Tony moved around and slipped his glasses on. “Light please FRIDAY.”

Light shone from the glasses directly on to the wound, helping him see what he was doing. He took the lid off the container and pressed the skin together with his other hand, causing Peter to wince.

Clint turned away from the makeshift medical centre at his kitchen table, back towards his family.

He picked the arrow back up and twirled it in his hands as he stood in front of them. Shudders were still going through Lila's body as she tried to contain her tears. Cooper was still stood as before, staring at a spot on the floor.

"What the hell happened?" Clint snapped.

They both didn't say anything for a beat; Lila shifting her weight.

"I said, what the hell happened that meant you shot our guest with an arrow?" Clint's voice boomed.

"We were just messing around..." Lila's voice was stopped by her own tears.

"Messing about - with *arrows*?" Clint's tone was like ice. "Are you fucking kidding me? How many times have we talked about safety? That they are not a toy." He snapped the arrow in half and threw it in the corner. "No more. I thought you were mature enough to learn. But no."

Lila let out a sob and Peter wanted to cry for her. She obviously loved shooting them.

"It was an accident. The phone went off just as he let go..." Lila blurted out.

"You realise that you could have seriously injured him. Killed him even. Please tell me you understand that now, at least?"

They both nodded vigorously but didn't speak as Clint appraised them.

"Whose idea was it?" Clint's voice sounded even more dangerous when it was quiet, and it made Peter sit up a bit.

"Be still. I'm almost done," Tony said sharply.

"It was my idea," Cooper spoke for the first time; his voice thick with emotion. Clint turned his sights on him, but Cooper carried on. "I thought if I got a video of me shooting something out of

his hand, the guys at school would leave me alone.” Tears ran from both of his eyes now. “I...I dared him to do it.”

Clint closed his eyes and took a breath. “Go and wait for me in your room.”

Peter’s heart rate shot up as he watched Cooper put his head back down and walk out towards the living room.

Clint turned back to Tony at the table. “You ok here if I go and deal with this?”

Peter noticed how his shoulders were hunched together and his fists balled. Would he...?

Tony sat back from fixing a large band aid over the wound. “Yep, all done actually.”

Clint pushed off the table and started for the door, but Peter leapt up and stood in his way, with his arms out in front of him, one hand on Clint’s chest.

“Please Mr Barton, sir, wait. It wasn’t all his fault. I should’ve just said no. I-I’m the eldest...it was my responsibility. Please don’t... get angry with him.” Peter burst all this out to a surprised looking Clint.

Clint looked down at his chest and Peter hastily snatched his hand away, not really realising that he’d been touching him.

“I’m just going to go and talk to him,” Clint said calmly, “that’s all. I’m sure Tony is going to want to have a little chat with you before bed as well.”

Peter looked over and Tony tapped the chair across from him. Peter relaxed a little and moved out of the way. Clint paused for a second and gave him a quick squeeze on the shoulder before he walked away.

Laura led Lila out after them, her giving him a sorrowful look as she went by.

Tony tapped the chair again and Peter slid into it, not making eye contact. Tony got another wipe out and ushered for Peter's bloodied hand. Peter gave it and let Tony wipe off the remaining blood. He popped it into the used pile next to him before sitting back.

"Well, you're having quite the day, aren't you?"

Peter gulped. He couldn't tell if Tony was angry or amused.

"Oh, this is going to be dinner party gold. Wait til we tell Sam that on your first visit to Clint's house, his kids shot you with an arrow." He let out a burst of laughter.

"It wasn't quite like that," mumbled Peter.

"No, but a story is in the telling, don't you think?" Tony's voice changed to something harder. "So, why don't you tell me your story, huh? How did you get peer pressured into becoming target practice?"

Peter chewed on his lip. "I don't know. He and Lila were arguing about sibling stuff and he was trying to get her to do it. He said he really wanted a video of him doing it. He has these bullies at school, and he wanted to scare them off...and I just thought, 'ok that might work' cos I was worried about him getting beaten up."

Tony nodded with a pull on his lips. "It didn't cross your mind that you could've been really hurt?"

"They were so good today and the target was big. I-I didn't really think about him missing."

"Ding, ding, ding. There we have the answer. You didn't think." Tony's voice was dripping with derision.

"I'm sorry," said Peter.

"Oh, if this hasn't healed much by the time we get home tomorrow, then you will be, because May is going to kill you for your recklessness. Oh, and then she'll come after me." There was a slight

jokiness to his tone, but his words sat with Peter. If May – and Kevin – found out he'd been so stupid, he didn't know what would happen. Kevin was angry enough over nothing. He'd have a fucking field day with this.

“Right, well. You go to bed and we can talk about this more in the morning.” Tony stood up and started cleaning up the mess.

“Shall I...?” Peter pointed down to the mess he'd made.

“No, I'll do it. You get to sleep and pray your healing factor does a good job.”

Peter nodded and did as he was told.

Tony

Tony woke to a strange sound. A look to his left showed Morgan sprawled like a starfish on the mattress next to him; her hair wild and spread around her almost like a halo, being moved gently when the fan whirled around. He leant over to make sure it wasn't her, but then heard the noise coming from the other side of the room.

He sat up properly and saw Peter on the pull-out bed underneath the window. His covers had been mostly thrown off and were pooled around his feet. Tony watched him thrash then, his naked torso arching away from something sharply and a whimper coming out of mouth as his hand gripped the bottom sheet so hard his knuckles were white. Tony slipped off the bed and edged over to him and could just make out incoherent mumbling punctuated by a clear, loud '*Stop*'. Tony looked back over at Morgan, it'd been loud enough that it should've woken her, but she hadn't moved an inch.

“Everything alright?” He looked over to see a bleary-eyed Clint at the opened door.

“Think he's having a nightmare,” Tony whispered.

Clint frowned deeply. Tony imagined he wasn't immune to them either.

"I'm going to try and wake him before he rips your bed in half. Might be best if it's just me..."

Clint nodded in understanding and Tony just made out his murmur; "*These kids will be the death of me,*" as he padded away.

Tony was no stranger to nightmares, and though he'd been nightmare free since Thanos dusted, he doubted that would last: not with everything that he'd experienced. He'd known from May that the kid had been having them since his Vulture encounters, but he'd hoped they weren't so bad. Now he had evidence that he was wrong. Peter's breathing was haggard, and his chest was moving up and down rapidly. He didn't want to scare him by waking him, but when he heard the metal of the bed groan under Peter's hand, he knew he had better stop him before he accidentally hurt himself.

"Kid, wake up." He got closer and knelt down, speaking louder this time. "Peter."

Peter's eyes flew open, his pupils enlarged. He leapt to the other side of the bed, banging his head against the radiator behind.

"Easy, easy kid. You were having a bad dream."

Peter's eyes blinked a few times and his breathing stayed laboured, but Tony noticed his body relax fractionally.

"We're at Clint's house, remember?" Tony said, keeping his voice calm and level. "You, me and Morgan."

Peter still looked in another place. Tony edged forward again and Peter's whole body flinched.

Tony's throat tightened. "It's OK Pete, it's Tony. Just Tony. You're safe."

Peter's body relaxed in an almost fluid motion. Tony wanted to touch him, but he wasn't sure if

that would spook him right now. Peter's breathing started to slow as he sat with his legs pulled up to his chest. He reached up to his head. "Ow," he breathed out.

"Can I look?" Tony indicated to his head. Truth was he had an urge to get closer to the kid; he'd never seen him look so spooked.

Tony thought he was about to say no, but he nodded slightly. Tony sat up on the edge of the bed and Peter leant his head forward enough for Tony to inspect it. He could feel a small bump, but there was no blood.

"No blood, no foul," Tony said lightly as the kid looked at him but didn't respond. He was pale and peaky: the bags that had been under his eyes seeming more pronounced even in the dim light.

Tony stood up slowly. "Hold on."

He went to the bathroom next door and came back with a damp flannel, which he handed to Peter.

"Here, it will make you feel better."

"Thanks," murmured Peter, his voice sounding hollow.

Tony watched as the kid wiped the sheen of sweat off the top half of his body. He looked altogether a bit of a mess: the bandage on his forearm, the ghost of a nasty bruise on his stomach and the vivid ones on his triceps. Maybe he *was* overdoing it with Spider-man and school – he was only a teenager after all. It was a lot to take on, physically and emotionally. Now wasn't the time, but he'd have to consider a conversation with May and him about dealing with it all.

"So, that was a pretty intense nightmare. What was it about?"

Peter tensed then; his eyes catching Tony's and they were full of questions; like maybe Tony had the answers to them. Whatever battle was going on was suddenly over, as his shoulders slumped. Peter's eyes detached from his and when he spoke his voice was hollow. "Nothing."

Tony frowned. That was not 'nothing', but he didn't want to push the kid. He knew that fragile

feeling after being in the depths of a nightmare.

“Ok, we don’t have to talk about it, if you don’t want to.” Tony leant back against the headboard. “You think you can lie down, maybe try to go back to sleep.”

Peter didn’t say anything but was compliant and unfolded himself from the foetal position and lay his head back on the pillow, as close to Tony’s leg without touching it. Tony made to get up, but Peter’s hand shot out and then pulled back.

“You want me to stay for a bit?”

Peter nodded hesitantly.

“Sure, no problem bud.”

When he sat back down this time, he made sure he let his hand rest on Peter’s shoulder and was rewarded that his instinct was right when Peter leant into his touch. The kid was like a sponge for physical affection and Tony was happy to provide it now he knew it wasn’t going to freak him out. After a minute, Tony started to gently stroke his hair and within a few minutes he felt Peter’s body fully relax and his breathing slow until he was asleep.

Tony crept away after a few more minutes and settled himself back onto the bed with a still oblivious Morgan, who’d not moved at all. She would sleep through an air raid siren. He didn’t think he would get back to sleep at this rate but listening to the breathing of the two children was hypnotic.

He felt disorientated when he woke a few hours later. Morgan was no longer next to him, and as he got up to investigate, he stopped short. Peter was lying on his side curled around Morgan almost protectively, his chin on her head and her head resting on his chest. As Tony stepped closer, he could see that Peter was holding her hand in his as they both slept. Emotion tickled Tony’s throat; a warm feeling starting in his stomach. He grabbed his phone and snapped a few shots. Pepper was going to love this.

It was still early, and the house was quiet. He could smell the coffee as he made his way into the kitchen and as he drank his first cup down quickly, he noted there was already a used cup on the counter. He heard a distant noise and he looked out of the kitchen window to see Clint over by the barn. He made his way over there and he saw Clint had dismantled one of the standing archery

targets.

“Morning Barton, doing a little remodelling?” Tony said as he got closer.

Clint turned to see him. “Hey Tony, you found the coffee I see?”

Tony waved the cup in his direction. “I’m like a bloodhound for it. Or would that be coffee hound. Doesn’t quite have the same ring to it.”

Clint flashed a quick smile before looking more serious. “Last night; was Peter alright in the end?”

Tony thought back to the nightmare. “Well, I managed to ensure that your bed is still in one piece, but he didn’t want to talk about it.” Tony raised his eyebrows with a sigh.

Clint nodded his head. “Fair enough, I guess.”

There was a beat of silence as each of the men were in their own thoughts about the things that caused them nightmares.

“So, what are you working on here?” Tony gestured to the targets.

Clint’s eyes darkened. “They can’t use them safely; they don’t get to train.”

“One could argue after yesterday’s mishap, that they simply need to train more.” Tony let a smile play on his lips that Clint resisted joining with his own.

“You are worse than Laura. She thinks grounding him and taking away his phone is enough. She thinks I’m being too harsh.” Clint rolled his eyes. “What my father would have done if I’d done that...”

Tony saw Clint’s eyes flash with darkness briefly. Howard would’ve had a few things to say, at the very least. He nodded in agreement.

“So, you got anything in mind for your teenager, or you think the flesh wound was enough punishment?” Clint asked.

Tony looked up at him in surprise. “He’s not really my teenager to punish.”

Clint’s sharp laugh told him he thought otherwise. “Isn’t he?”

“He does have his Aunt May,” Tony countered.

“You think that’s enough for someone like him?”

“Look, I’m not good at that sort of thing. He probably wouldn’t do anything I told him. He messed up one time and I took his suit away and that turned out a disaster with him half-dead so…”

“So, he’s going to need a different kind of parenting,” Clint said with a shrug. “You weren’t wrong, what you said about him yesterday.”

“That he makes stupid decisions? Well, yes, we had our case in point yesterday.”

Clint half smiled. “No, I mean the part where you said he’s a good kid. When we spoke to Cooper last night, he finally opened up and told us everything that had been going on at school. Bullies, harassing him online daily, threatening to hurt him. Peter was trying to be a good friend to Cooper by letting him shoot that video. And did you see how he tried to defend him when he saw I was mad. Even after Coop shot him with an arrow!”

Tony remembered Peter’s leap out of the chair and sat back with a smile. “That’s Peter.”

“Like I said, he’s a good kid.” Clint repeated and Tony felt a sense of pride, even though he knew he’d had nothing to do with it. “I don’t envy you. Parenting a superhero is going to have it’s challenges.”

“I’m his mentor; not his parent.

“Sure Tony,” Clint’s voice told him he didn’t believe what he’d just said. “You couldn’t hide your affection for that kid if you tried. And neither can he. Regardless of what you want to call it, he does need you, Tony. I’m guessing his parents are...”

Tony nodded. “And his Uncle not long back.”

“Shit. That’s...a lot. You can’t be half arsed about this. You’ve got to be all in, or he’ll get hurt. And I’m not talking arrows.” Clint paused and looked at him intensely. “Are you? All in?”

Tony remembered how he’d felt when the kid dusted in his hands. Not that he’d lost the battle in that moment, but that he’d lost someone he loved; lost a son. He thought of all the moments before that and the time they’d shared since he came back. He pictured Peter this morning with Morgan and last night when he woke from his nightmare.

“100%” he replied.

Chapter End Notes

Well, he is smart but still a teenager ♀! Did it seem like something he might do?

Chapter 15

Peter

Peter woke up to hear voices. Looking up, he found two small people at the end of his bed - Morgan wrapped up in his sheets. Oh yeah, Morgan had gotten in with him earlier. Then he remembered being woken by Tony from the intense Kevin nightmare.

Great, he probably thinks I'm a total nut job.

Before he had a chance to spiral about that, a weight landed on his chest and Morgan's face was inches from his, her brown hair dangling in front of her eyes.

"Peter, you're awake!"

Morgan was seemingly oblivious to the fact that the two of them talking loudly about Peppa Pig would wake anyone up.

"I am," he said, unable not to smile at her adorable expression.

"You have a lot of baddies," said Nate, ignoring his personal space too and poking his arm.

"Yeah, I gotta be more careful, huh?"

Nate nodded thoughtfully.

"Can we play Lego now?" Morgan asked, looking up from under her eyelashes at him.

"Sure."

Peter was led downstairs by the little ones and helped them get the box of Legos out in the lounge. He could hear some voices outside of the house – judging by their depth they were Clint and Tony - but he didn't know what kind of reception he was going to get after last night, so he decided not to venture out there.

He'd been playing with the kids for over half an hour when he heard someone coming down the stairs. He looked up to see Cooper, who paled slightly when he saw him.

“Um, hey Peter.”

“Hey,” Peter brightened his voice. “You wanna...?” Peter held up the Lego tower that he'd been instructed to start by ‘Little Miss Stark’.

“Sure,” Cooper sounded distinctly unsure, but he sat down across from him.

Morgan squeezed her way onto his lap then, asking him to fit something difficult for her. He helped her with that and a few things. Cooper didn't say anything at all, just fiddled without really making anything. Peter had rolled his sleeves up and he caught Cooper looking at his forearm with an anxious look on his face. They locked eyes then and Cooper looked away.

“I'm really sorry,” he choked out. “I-I didn't even say that last night.”

“It's ok,” Peter saw him blanch. “Really, I'm fine. It just bled a lot, but it's not that bad. Look.”

Peter pulled the band aid off quickly, causing himself to wince. He showed Cooper the angry red line left on his arm, which didn't look half as bad as last night, before covering it back up.

Cooper frowned but looked relieved. “Hopefully it won't scar.”

Peter smiled. “Yeah, but if there is no scar, who will believe my awesome story?”

Cooper smiled back, but it quickly fell. “Still, I'm sorry I dared you. It was a stupid idea; the whole thing was stupid.”

“And yet, I can confirm, *not* the most stupid thing Parker has ever done.” Tony’s voice came from behind him and Peter turned to see him stood with his hand on the back of the couch. “Breakfast is ready, kiddos.”

Peter felt nervous as they all ate around the dinner table. The adults didn’t bring last night up and were chatting lightly as usual, punctuated with dealing with the little kids.

As everyone finished up, Clint looked over towards where Peter was sitting next to Cooper. “Cooper, you can clean up the breakfast stuff and then I want you outside for some work. There is wood to be chopped and some hay to be shifted.”

Cooper nodded solemnly.

“Tony, you want yours in on this?”

Yours. Peter jerked his head over to Tony.

“Oh, I reckon so.” Tony fixed his eyes to Peter’s. “And you can fix that ATV motor too. Any problem with that, Parker?”

“No, sir,” he said quickly.

“Not that you’ll be using it anytime soon, Cooper,” Clint added with a point of a teaspoon.

Cooper nodded his head.

The others started to get up then, with talks about playing in the sandpit and homework for Lila. Peter jumped up and started clearing stuff up, taking his lead from Cooper.

“So, what’s the deal with you and Mr Stark anyway?” Cooper asked once the others had left: his hands deep in the frothy water.

“What do you mean?”

“You’re his intern, right? He acts more like your Dad,” Cooper said, putting a dripping dish on the drawing board.

Peter stilled.

“It’s complicated. We connected over our...shared interests. Y’know, science, engineering stuff. He’s been really good to me, and I respect him a lot.”

That answer didn’t cover 1% of what he felt about Tony but it seemed to satisfy Cooper’s curiosity. The truth was that he didn’t mind if Tony treated him like he was his Dad. He didn’t mind one bit.

Tony

Tony came around the vehicle to see Peter crouched down working on it.

“How’s it going?”

Peter straightened up, his top stuck in the back of his shorts and his hands blackened with oil.

“Not bad,” Peter picked up a rag and wiped his hands, not really getting much of it off.

Tony watched as he wiped some sweat off his forehead, causing a black smudge across it. The sun was even hotter today and after a morning of chopping wood, carrying bales of hay and other physical work that Clint managed to find, even Peter had had to succumb to the heat and take his

top off to cool down. Tony could see a slight pink tinge to Peter's shoulders as he turned. Must remind him about the sunscreen.

"You need a hand?" Tony would be lying if he said that he wasn't itching to get involved. Tinkering was his favourite past time.

"Actually, I think I might have it." Peter stepped up and sat on the seat. He turned the key and the engine sputtered to life.

"Yes!" Peter exclaimed with a fist pump and Tony smiled at his enthusiasm.

"You want to drive it into the barn?"

Peter looked panicked and Tony chuckled. "Don't worry, I'll do it. We'll have to have some driving lessons though, otherwise the 17th birthday present I have in mind for you will go to waste."

Peter's eyes widened. "What?!"

Tony raised a finger to his lips, enjoying the teens reaction. "Shhh, it's a surprise."

"I-I really couldn't accept..."

Tony shushed him again. "There is nothing to accept...yet."

Peter fidgeted and Tony was enjoying Peter's discomfort a bit too much. The kid hated when Tony spent money on him, even after all this time. Unless it was food – Peter *never* turned down food.

"Anyway, go get cleaned up. The littlies have specifically requested your presence at the lake."

"There isn't any more you and Mr Barton want me to do?" Peter asked.

Tony snorted slightly; did this kid just ask for more punishment?!

“Your hard-labour sentence has been fulfilled. Now it’s babysitting – I’m not sure which is considered more tortuous...” Tony smiled. “Go on, hurry up, the tots legion awaits you.”

Peter beamed such a bright smile at him before heading off, that Tony’s throat tightened.

Tony accepted the beer that Clint offered him as they sat in the loungers watching the five children playing in the water. Peter was the centre of attention, taking turns boosting them all into the water; the little ones not as high or far. There were squeals of excitement as they swam back towards him in their float suits. Lila splashed him purposefully and Peter swam after her in the water, picking her up and throwing her up and into the water, before being tackled into the water by Cooper. They all came up laughing. Nate called out “Peter, Peter” and Peter swam over to him in a few strokes and began swirling him around.

Clint let out a chuckle as he watched Morgan and Nate now climb onto Peter. “The kid’s got some fans.”

“Morgan is obsessed with him.” Tony took a sip of his drink. “I’m starting to worry she’d rather spend time with him, than me.”

Clint grunted. “Easy choice.”

Tony huffed in return.

Laura grinned and raised her eyebrows. “I think he has a different sort of admirer with Lila.”

Clint and Tony looked over at Lila who was talking to Peter now, looking up at him with a softness in her eyes as her hands unconsciously fiddled with her hair. Clint balked.

“Well, he is a handsome young man...” Laura said, her eyes glinting with glee at Clint’s expression.

“Woman, get my bow!” Clint said in mock anger and the other two laughed.

“At least that would be a more age-appropriate crush than the one Cooper has on Wanda...” Laura said, flashing another grin at Clint.

Clint looked just as outraged at that. “Stop it: they are practically siblings.”

Tony bit his lip. “Does Missouri count as the South because, if so, I have so many frankly inappropriate jokes on the tip of my tongue.”

“Lucky for you, this is the mid-west so feel free to keep them to yourself, Stark,” said Clint, with a raised eyebrow.

Tony grinned back. “So, how is Wanda? I haven’t heard from her in a while.”

Clint stretched out. “Yeah, not too bad. She spent a week here before she headed off to Sokovia.”

“Still helping out with their Displacement relief efforts?”

“Yeah. She extended her trip, but she’ll be back to the Compound in a month or two.”

Clint had taken Wanda under his wing (ha – pun intended) since she had first joined the team. Tony was glad that she had his family as well as the Avengers on her side after everything she lost. It must’ve been hard to come back to see everyone reuniting and not having that chance with Vision.

There was a little cry and Cooper came out of the water holding a crying Nate. Laura went over and started to soothe him.

“Boss, you asked me to tell you when it was approaching your departure time.” FRIDAY’s voice came from his glasses.

“Well, we’re going to have to start gathering our stuff up. I promised Pepper we’d get home before she di,.” Tony said as Laura came up with a red faced, but now calm Nate in her hands.

“You’re going?!” Nate asked, with sad eyes. “Peter and Morgan too?”

“I’m afraid so, buddy.”

The puppy dog eyes met his again.

“But you’re coming to see us in New York in a few weeks for the Gala, right?”

Clint rolled his eyes – he wasn’t a big formal party person - but Laura smiled. “Yes, we’re delighted to come - even old grumpy here.”

Tony bent down to Nate’s level. “See pal, we’ll see you very soon.”

He seemed satisfied. “Ok then, bye. Don’t forget to say bye to Auntie Nat.”

A shiver ran through Tony. He turned to Clint who had a haunted look in his eyes.

“It’s, um, just something we put together to remember her.”

Tony’s throat was dry, but he forced himself to swallow. “Can I see?”

The tree was still a sapling, but it looked strong. The base was decorated with art and photos, sealed in plastic to protect from the elements.

Tony's legs felt like lead as he sunk to the ground before it, picking up a photo.

It was Natasha, smiling, with the three Barton kids sitting on top of her like she was a sofa. His chest felt heavy and he struggled to get his breathing steady. He looked over at another one – a rare photo of them all at Avengers tower. Before everything had gone to shit and the Accords – *he* – had broken up the family. There was another candid photo of her, taken like she didn't know it had been. But it was Nat; she would have known. Underneath the frame was a crafted sign that read simply "Our Hero".

"Laura thought it was important to put this together for the kids. Planting a tree so her memory lives on. We say goodbye to her every time we leave." Clint's voice was tight.

"She would have pretended to hate it," Tony croaked.

Clint smiled, though his eyes were full of tears. "Yep."

"Every time I hear that Tony Stark 'Saviour of the World' bullshit, it makes me want to scream. Nat and Vision; they were the real heroes."

Clint nodded in agreement. "She was worth ten of me."

Tony looked at Clint and knew what he was thinking.

"You are right where she wanted you to be."

Clint locked eyes on him, and he could see a flash of guilt run through them before he nodded. "It doesn't make me miss her any less."

"Me either." Tony struggled to contain his emotions, but he forced himself to look at Clint. "I tried to get her back...when I had the stones...I really tried."

Clint nodded his head in acknowledgement as he sat down next to Tony and they sat looking at the pictures in silence.

Peter

Peter finished another game of snap with Morgan as the jet winged it's way home.

"Can I watch Peppa Pig now?" Morgan asked him, again using those wide eyes.

"I'll ask Daddy."

Peter leaned across the aisle to where Tony was sitting, staring out of the small window.

"Tony?"

There was no response. He tried again, louder.

"Tony?"

Tony's head snapped around. "Huh?"

"Morgan wants to watch Peppa Pig. Is that cool?" Peter asked.

"Yeah, sure." Tony went back to looking out of the window. Peter helped Morgan get her headphones on and she settled back into the thick leather chair with her legs pulled up underneath her.

Tony had been quiet when they'd been leaving and since they were on the jet. Peter guessed it was

to do with the memorial to Natasha. He'd come across it when he was working this morning and he'd seen them coming back from that direction looking haunted. He hadn't known her very well – having only met her in Germany briefly - but he still felt the sacrifice she had made to bring him back. He wasn't sure if there was a way to ever repay something like that.

He didn't try to engage Tony in conversation as it was obvious that he needed some space. Peter had lost enough people in his life to understand. They had another two hours travel time left so he got his homework out and started working on it.

Half an hour had passed before he heard Tony move; his weight settling into the chair next to him.

“What are you working on?”

“Just finished an English paper,” replied Peter, tapping his pen on the book, “and now I'm moving on to Calculus.”

“Ooh, something juicy.” Tony wiggled his eyebrows. “Show me what you got.”

By the time they landed back in New York, Tony was back to his usual self; joking around with Peter and full of smiles. Peter knew how grief could sucker punch you, sometimes when you least expected it, so he didn't expect Tony to be 'over' it, but he was selfishly glad to end the amazing weekend on a happier note. It had been so nice to be away and free and without the tension he felt daily at 'home'.

Tony had insisted that they drive him home – well, get Happy to drive him - but Morgan had wanted to come to see where he lived. Peter couldn't think of anything worse than having Kevin around Morgan and Tony.

“I'll get your bag.” Tony was out of the car before Peter could tell him that he didn't have to do that for him.

“Thanks for the ride, Happy,” he called up to the driver and received a muttered response along the lines of ‘whatever’. He pressed a kiss onto Morgan’s sleeping head before getting out, pleased that she’d fallen asleep ten minutes earlier so they now wouldn’t come up to the apartment.

Tony closed the boot, now with Peter’s bag in hand. “There you go, kiddo.”

“Thanks,” Peter shouldered the bag. “And thank you for this weekend. It was, like, the most amazing time I’ve had in a long time.”

“What? Better than a night at a high school rager?” Tony’s eyes danced.

“Not really my scene.” Peter frowned.

“Right answer,” said Tony, “and you’re welcome - for the weekend. Good company, for Morgan, obviously you’re no intellectual match for me.”

“Of course,” Peter’s sarcastic tone clear.

“Oh, I almost forgot.” Peter watched as Tony pulled out some cash from his pocket. “Wages.”

Peter took a half step back. “Woah, thank you, but no. I cannot accept money for a weekend of swimming in a lake, climbing trees and shooting arrows. You literally took me to summer camp. I think, I mean I’ve never been to one, but it sounds like what people might do at a sum---”

“- Parker. Stop. We agreed. Babysitting, remember?” Tony put his hand up before Peter could voice the protest he had ready. Tony pressed the money into his hand.

Peter thumbed it quickly. “There is \$500 here! Do you even know what the minimum wage is?!”

“\$12.50 an hour. We were away for 36 hours. That, plus a small \$50 bonus for the arrow story.” Tony’s smile deepened.

Peter frowned at him and separated out some of the money. “You can’t pay me for sleeping.” He

handed it back to Tony, who finally took it with a clucking noise.

“You underestimate how entertaining your exploits were.”

“I’m never going to live that down, am I?” Peter groaned.

Tony just laughed. “Right, you want me to come up with you?”

That was the last thing he wanted. “Nah, I’m fine.”

“That reminds me – give me your arm,” Tony said, his hand outstretched.

Peter did as he was told and was met with a whoosh of pain as Tony ripped the band aid off.

“Ow!”

“Wow, you can barely see it. Looks like you get lucky and I won’t mention it to Aunt May, if you like.”

“Yes! Please, don’t.”

Tony chuckled again before pulling Peter into a tight, warm hug. Peter let himself relax into it, taking in his now familiar smell. Tony ruffled his hair slightly as he pulled away.

“Dinner. Party. Gold.” Tony gave him a wink and turned back towards the car.

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The smile didn't leave his face as he climbed the stairs to the apartment. He stopped at the door and pushed his hands into his pockets to find the key. He let himself in and as he went to put the key away in his pocket, his fingers brushed against something he wasn't expecting. He pulled out the other half of the money that he'd returned to Tony. He must have slipped it in his pocket when they hugged goodbye.

He groaned and pulled his phone out. The call was answered after one ring;

"Stark Industries, how may I direct your call?"

"Since when did you get so sneaky?"

A laugh burst from Tony's end. "I always have been."

"Ton-y," Peter whined.

"Underoos, just consider it an advance on your wages. See you Tuesday?"

Peter sighed but with a lightness Tony would be able to hear. "See you Tuesday, Tony."

He tapped the phone off aware that he had a wide grin on his face.

"Where did you get that from?"

Peter looked up at the same time he noticed his Spidey sense. It thrummed now, like a cricket sat on the back of his neck. Kevin stood in the hallway.

"Tony insisted on paying me for helping with Morgan this weekend."

Kevin motioned for him to give him the money. Peter didn't want to get closer to him, but he did, handing the money over to him. He watched as Kevin thumbed through the notes.

“There is \$500 here!” Kevin exclaimed.

“I know, I told him it’s too much bu-“ Peter began.

“What exactly is he paying you for?”

Peter frowned. “Like I said-“

“ - I could never understand this weird relationship you had. Naming a Foundation after you, for Christ’s sake. Why would a guy like *that* be interested in someone like *you*? But now it makes sense.” Kevin took a step closer as he flapped the money in front of him. “How often did you get on your knees for this kind of money?”

It took Peter a second to realise what he was implying,, but when he did he felt sick.

“Tony would never...” He blustered not able to find the words; the idea that Tony would take advantage of him in that way. “You have a sick mind.”

Kevin had him up against the wall by his neck before slamming him back against it again. Peter groaned.

Kevin let him go and started moving away, shoving the money into his pocket.

“I thought you felt taking his money was charity,” Peter murmured as he pushed himself off the wall.

Kevin stopped and turned around sharply with his fists balled. Peter bolted as soon as he started moving towards him. He made it to the door of his room when the front door opened.

“Look who just got back,” Kevin’s voice was light, and Peter’s eyes darted to him. How did he switch his mood so fast? He was a fucking good actor.

“Peter!” Alfie ran over to him and gave him a big hug before running over to his toys. Peter took a leaf from Kevin’s book and composed himself into a smile, though it felt weird on his face right now.

“Hey sweetie, come sit and have a cup of tea. I made walnut date loaf.” May came over and gave him a kiss before bustling into the kitchen towards the kettle. He watched as Kevin came up behind May, giving her a squeeze, and she giggled in return.

“Sit down then Peter, I can’t wait to hear all about it.”

Peter focussed on May as he sat down and started describing the stars.

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Peter

Peter pulled his jumper over his head before shoving his feet into his sneakers. It’d been a busy patrol and he was much later than normal. He’d texted May to let her know that he’d been held up, but she hadn’t responded yet, though given how tired she had been lately, it crossed his mind that she might already be asleep. She liked him to keep to a curfew, worrying about the affects of him being up too late on his health and his schoolwork. However, she’d always been practical about it and didn’t expect him to suddenly stop helping someone just because it was 11pm. He tried to be late as rarely as possible and the balance worked.

He headed out of the alley and jogged towards the apartment block. It was gone midnight and the streets were fairly quiet. Once outside he climbed up the outside of the building to the second floor, once again glad that they didn’t live as high up as they used to.

He eased his window open slowly and let himself drop inside the darkened room, before closing it quietly. The wood had a tendency to creak and he didn’t want to wake anybody up. He chucked his bag into the corner and turned the lamp on.

“Well, this is a turn up for the books.”

He jumped at Kevin's voice: turning to see the man stood in the doorway.

"I came in here earlier to have a little word about your attitude yesterday. I guess I was too late." Kevin stepped into the room with his hands on his hips. "You already seem to think you're in charge; staying out until past midnight, like you own the place."

Peter opened his mouth to say that he'd texted May to let her know, but then realised that he didn't have a good reason to be out so late on a Monday night that May could agree with.

"Where's May?" He asked, trying not to let his voice waver.

"She went to cover a friend's shift last minute, so I said I'd take care of you."

Peter's spidey sense was going berserk and he swallowed and spoke calmly, trying to defuse Kevin's thinly veiled anger.

"I'm sorry. I lost track of time."

Peter's apology had the opposite effect as he watched Kevin unbuckle his belt and start to pull it through his loops. His throat suddenly felt dry.

"She was always saying what a great kid you were, not a typical teenager. How you were good as gold for her and Ben. But all I get it push back and back chat."

He folded the belt in half and Peter couldn't take his eyes off of it. Peter didn't know what to do. He knew he could get away; he could hurt Kevin easily. Go somewhere else. But he remembered May and Alfie and he knew he'd made his choice the first time he had let Kevin hit him and he'd never told. Kevin seemed to know it too; his threat about Ben only reinforcing Peter's decision. Peter's stomach tightened; he didn't know what a belt was going to feel like, and super healing didn't mean he didn't feel pain.

"Tell me where you were," Kevin snapped.

That was one thing Peter refused to compromise on. He would never tell him about Spider-man. He pushed his eyes to the floor and his hands in his pockets.

After he didn't answer, Kevin let out a growl and pulled him by the collar from the corner of the room that he hadn't realised he'd backed up into.

"Fine, top off and hands against the wall."

He tried to reason with him again but couldn't keep the agitation out of his voice.

"You don't need to...I won't stay out late again. It w-won't happen again."

"Let's make sure," Kevin said, his face set in determination.

When he didn't move, Kevin grabbed him again and pitched him face down onto the twin bed. He yanked Peter's jumper up over his head and started laying into him with the belt. It was like fire on his flesh; the only sound in the room was the slap of the leather against his skin and Kevin's grunts of exertion. He forced himself to be quiet, biting down on the pillow to stop crying out his only small act of rebellion.

"Earth to Peter."

Peter startled as a French fry flew close to his eye-line.

"What? Sorry?"

"What is with you lately?" MJ frowned at him and Ned was looking at him with concerned, puppy dog eyes.

"Nothing." Peter shifted in his seat, but that caused a jolt of pain through his sore back and he held back the whimper that wanted to cascade out of his mouth.

“You’ve barely eaten anything,” Ned said. Ned knew that Peter needed to eat a lot on the daily and usually brought him leftovers from home.

“To be honest, I’m not feeling well.” That, at least, wasn’t a lie. The throbbing in his back had been relentless all day; no position giving comfort. “I think I’m going to just get some fresh air before class.”

“You want company?” Ned asked but Peter just shook his head before grabbing his bag and getting away. Away from any probing questions that he just didn’t have the energy to sidestep right now.

Peter stumbled through the rest of the school day on autopilot. By the time the final bell went, he was exhausted. He almost cried when he saw Happy waiting for him. Any other time he would’ve cancelled, but he’d just agreed to intern for pay so he couldn’t exactly not show up the first week. All he wanted was to curl up and sleep.

“Hey Happy,” he said politely as he climbed in the back.

Happy grunted.

At least Peter didn’t have to worry about talking to Happy. He was aware that Happy got irritated by his constant chatter so he wouldn’t mind a day off of it for sure. He rested his head on the window and watched the traffic.

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“Kid.”

Peter jolted awake as there was a tap on his window. He looked up to see Happy’s usually unhappy face.

“Get out of my car already” he said, not unkindly.

Peter shuffled out without making eye contact. “Thanks for the ride, Happy.”

Peter had gotten almost to the elevator when he heard Happy again.

“Peter, I can hang around to give you a lift back home later if you want.” Happy seemed unsure of his own offer.

Peter forced a smile. “That’s ok. I can get the subway no problem. Thanks though.”

His small nap hadn’t seemed to help his exhaustion after all, and as the elevator climbed through the building, he wished for the first time ever that he didn’t have to be here. As the doors opened, he headed down to the lab and prepared himself to pretend to be happy.

The door to the lab made a ‘choosh’ sound as it opened.

“Good Afternoon Peter,” The AI’s voice said warmly. “Boss asked me to let you know that he got held up and to do whatever made you happy til he got here.”

Peter felt the muscles in his body relax. He wouldn’t have to pretend for a little while at least. He decided he would rather wait for Tony before starting on one of the SI projects, so he sat down on the battered couch and got his homework out on the coffee table.

A loud clink forced his eyes open. He sat up from the couch and the book on his lap slid to the floor with a thump. His eyes landed on Tony, who was on the other side of the room, working on a suit. Tony must have heard the book fall as he looked over now, wiping his hands on a rag and coming over with an increasingly wide smile on his face.

“Hey, back in the land of the living?”

Peter wiped his eyes. “Yeah, sorry about that.”

Tony shrugged. “You obviously needed it. Late patrol?”

Peter nodded tentatively.

Tony sat down on the coffee table across from him, their knees almost touching, reaching down and picking the textbook off the floor.

Tony's face took on a more serious expression and he held Peter's gaze. "Look kid, I was going to wait to have this conversation with May, but I think you and I need to talk about it first."

Peter's heart thumped. *Did he know?*

"You've seemed out of sorts lately – you were exhausted at the weekend, the nightmare, sleeping again today..."

Peter felt saliva pool in his mouth.

"...well, I just want to check that you're getting the right work-life balance. God, did that phrase just come out of my mouth? Pepper would have a field day." Tony rolled his eyes.

Peter's stomach reduced its churning. This was just normal Spider-man concerns, but he couldn't have that taken away. It was the only thing keeping him sane right now.

"It's not patrol. I just haven't been sleeping well lately. Don't tell May, don't take the suit away..." Peter couldn't keep a slight whine out of his voice.

Tony grimaced. "I won't take it away again Pete. That was a mistake on my part."

Peter let out a breath. He still had that to rely on.

"But - yes, there is a but - I need you to be taking better care of yourself. Sleep is important and, judging by the state of you on Saturday, the lack of it is affecting your healing factor. If you aren't getting enough rest, you need to cut back on your patrols a bit, or you're going to get an injury that even you find hard to get up from."

“I can handle it,” Peter said.

“So do that. By doing what I –“ Tony paused briefly, “- suggest.”

Peter almost laughed. He obviously wanted to use the word ‘say’ instead of ‘suggest’. Peter took this as sign that he was trying to treat him like less of a child, which he appreciated.

“OK,” said Peter, his breath shaky, just glad his secret wasn’t out and Spider-man wasn’t being taken away from him.

“OK? OK, then great,” Tony sat up like he had expected Peter to push back, which in this moment Peter thought that he normally would have. “Wake yourself up and come over and give me a hand.” Tony clapped his hand on Peter’s back briefly before heading back across the lab.

Peter went rigid as flames of pain went through his body. He managed to ease himself up and into the bathroom, where he closed the door before allowing himself to take deep breaths. They didn’t manage to curb his nausea and before he knew it, he was retching into the toilet, bringing up the little he’d eaten today. He sat back and wiped his mouth. The throbbing in his back reaching new heights: he needed an icepack or something but he couldn’t exactly ask for that without raising suspicions.

He stuck his head out of the bathroom, hoping he didn’t look too green. “Um, Tony?”

Tony looked up from his workstation.

“You mind if I grab a quick shower. Might wake me up a bit...”

“Knock yourself out. There are towels in there.” Tony looked back at what he was doing, and Peter went back in, locking the door tightly.

“FRIDAY, are there surveillance cameras in this room?”

“No Peter, there are no surveillance cameras active in the bathrooms.”

Peter went over to the mirror and slowly peeled off his top as it stuck in parts. He turned his back to the mirror and looked over his shoulder. There was a mess of intersecting red lines across his back, dotted with bruises around them. There were a few weeping cuts where Kevin had turned the buckle on him towards the end; he assumed to get a reaction that Peter had been denying him. He had let himself make a noise then – asked him to stop - and it seemed that had been enough to satisfy Kevin that he had gotten his point across. The thought of telling Tony what had happened last night barely entered his thoughts. He had broken curfew after all. He wouldn't do it again in a hurry.

He stripped off the rest of his clothes and ran the shower as cold as it would go. He put his fist in his mouth as he stepped in, biting down at the spark of pain and holding on until the rhythmic cold spray had left his back feeling numb.

By the time he had carefully dried off and got dressed, he stepped back into the lab to find Pizzas on the coffee table where his books had been.

“Better?” Tony asked, a slice of Pepperoni in his hand.

“Much,” replied Peter truthfully.

“Right, let's eat and work, small fry.”

Peter grabbed a slice and headed over to his mentor.

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Peter

“Well, well, well,” Pepper’s voice came from behind him and Peter turned around to see her dazzling smile. She was dressed in a floor-length silver gown, a small slit running up the side, showing a flash of leg, “you do scrub up well.”

Peter felt his cheeks begin to heat a little. “Um, thanks, you look really beautiful Miss Potts.”

“Hands off, Parker, she is all mine.” Tony arrived in the living room and kissed Pepper on the lips.

Peter looked away; pretty certain his cheeks were reddening further.

“Kid, where is your tie?”

Peter looked away; he had tried to tie that thing a few times, but he’d gotten angry and thrown it onto the bed in a huff.

“Oh, I’m going for a different kind of, um, look.”

Tony tilted his head. “Go get it.”

Peter went to protest, but Tony got there before he did. “Go on, it will give me the chance to ravish my wife.”

Peter made a face and headed for his room. His enhanced hearing meant could hear Pepper’s chastising whisper; “Don’t make the poor boy uncomfortable like that, Tony.”

Tony let out a low chuckle. “I thought fathers were supposed to embarrass their kids.”

Peter stopped still where he was at the foot of his bed. Did Tony just say that? What?! He felt a warm pull in his stomach alongside a flash of nerves. It wasn't that he didn't like the idea that Tony saw him that way – in fact it was amazing. But it felt wrong; why would he want someone like him as a son?

It was a throwaway comment, not something to hang on Peter, get a grip.

He'd got to the Tower last night in time to hang out with Cooper and Lila who'd arrived with the rest of their family by jet around dinner time. Today he'd shown them some of the New York sights, as well as a shopping trip, before everyone headed back here to get glammed up.

He picked up the slim red tie and cautiously stepped back out into the living area, hopeful they wouldn't be canoodling somewhere. But no, Pepper was sat on the couch putting crazy-high heels on and Tony was in front of the mirror, fiddling with his manicured beard.

“Bring it over here then, Underoos,” Tony called, turning around from the mirror. Peter did as he was told. “Let me guess, you couldn't do it, so you thought, I just won't wear it?”

Peter shrugged. He felt like it was something he should be able to do by now. He always thought that Ben would be the one to show him how to do it and now that would never happen. There was a hollow feeling in his sternum. He was always shocked at how grief could – *still* - swell from such a small, mundane thing.

“Ties are tricky. I don't have time to teach you now so, just...” Tony stepped closer to Peter, the smell of his cologne tickling his nose.

Tony turned his collar up and Peter felt the warmth of his hands as he threaded the tie around his neck. A few swift moments later and the tie was tied.

“Chin up,” Tony said and as Peter complied, he straightened the collar out, smoothing along it once it was flat. He stood back from Peter then, his arms grasping his shoulders and looked him up and down. Then, he firmly cupped Peter's face with one hand, his eyes smiling down at him through his tinted glasses. “Looking good kid,” and he gave Peter's face a gentle tap.

The warm feeling that had been in his stomach from his eavesdropping surged again and he let it turn into a wide smile.

“Shame about the hair,” Tony suddenly smirked and ruffled Peter’s hair.

“Ton-y!” he exclaimed, lurching for the mirror, pressing down the curls. “Do you know how long it took me to get it right?”

Tony chuckled at this as the door to the elevator opened and he heard Clint’s voice call out; “Hey Starks, you ready to go, or what?”

Peter finished his hair and ran to catch them all up.

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Peter had been sent in the back door with The Bartons while Tony and Pepper had gone to do the red-carpet thing out front. Tony wanted Morgan – and him - shielded from the media as much as possible, and he wasn’t one for attention anyway, so it suited him. Clint and Laura kept a low profile – no point living in a secluded spot if you were just going to get your photo splashed all over the internet.

Once they were inside, Peter heard May call his name. He turned to see her in a beautiful teal gown, her dark hair pinned up. He couldn’t remember a time that he’d seen her in such a get up; their life had never been NY social events and Galas. But now, it seemed it was. A strange side effect of a spider’s bite that had led them down a winding path to Tony.

Her smile was glowing as she reached him and pulled him into a hug. She’d been so excited to come tonight; flapping over what to wear all week, but still not making too big a deal about it to Alfie as he’d been miffed he wasn’t going - only been placated to know that Morgan wasn’t either. Peter sensed Kevin behind her as he opened his eyes and pulled back from the hug. Kevin had grumbled so much about the event that he’d hoped he wouldn’t come. No such luck.

“You look stunning Aunt May,” Peter said.

“Oh, stop it,” she said, batting his chest.

“You don’t have to be a genius like Peter here to see that May,” Tony said as he appeared from nowhere; stepping forward to kiss her cheek, his hand on Peter’s shoulder as he did.

“Thank you for inviting us Mr Stark,” Kevin said, a polite smile on his face.

“Can’t have a Parker Foundation event without some Parkers, hey?”

May’s eyes were smiling as she gestured to him and Tony; “And look at the two of you together. You almost match. I’m guessing you didn’t go to Macy’s after all?”

When Tony had heard that was Peter’s plan, he’d looked horrified and the next thing he knew, he and all the Barton’s found themselves in a private room at the back of an exclusive designer store being helped into clothes that cost more than a small car – or at least he imagined as they had no price tags on them. Protests fell on deaf ears and it wasn’t like Peter had a fall-back option since he was only living with the handful of outfits that he’d bought since he got back.

“I may have insisted on a different establishment,” Tony admitted with a mischievous glint in his eye.

Peter opened his mouth to say again that he would pay him back, but Tony gave him a short stare. “Uh uh, I already said it was my treat.”

“Let me get a photo of you two together,” May said, pulling out her phone.

Tony’s arm slid around his shoulder and squeezed him tight and the beam Peter sent to camera was wide enough to start to hurt his cheeks.

“Can you take one of us?” May asked Tony, handing him her phone, and then motioning to Kevin.

As Kevin slipped his arm around May’s waist, Peter went to get out of the way but May caught his arm. “A family photo.”

Peter tried not to blanch at that word nor when May pushed him to stand in front of Kevin and Kevin's hand landed on his shoulder.

"Geez Parker, you aren't at a funeral," Tony joked after a few shots.

Kevin's hand squeezed his shoulder and Peter repressed a shudder and tried to give what looked like a genuine smile.

The Gala was pretty boring after all; well for Peter at least. There was food – amazing food actually - a silent auction for more fundraising, a comedy act, some speeches about The Parker Foundation's good works, including one by Pepper, and then a band came out. Tony and Pepper had spent most of it 'pressing the flesh' as Tony called it, helping to get more donations for the charity. Though Peter imagined that most of the foundation was paid for by Tony. Peter was glad that Cooper and Lila were there so that they could chat and slip their phones out when the grown ups had gone off dancing.

May had coaxed him to dance once – and he only would for her - as it made her so happy. The dancing seemed to make a lot of people happy come to think of it. That, or the free-flowing champagne, he wasn't sure which.

"Peter, get over here!" Tony called from across the room and Peter headed over to where Tony was gathered with a group of Avengers. Dr Banner loomed large above everyone; he'd already humoured Peter earlier talking about his work. Peter hoped he wasn't getting annoying with his millions of questions, but Dr Banner always seemed happy to talk about his research. Next to him was Sam Wilson, Rhodey and Clint.

Peter hadn't spoken to Mr Wilson yet, so he addressed him as he came into the circle.

"Hey Mr Wilson, how are you?"

"It's Sam, but yeah, pretty good. Long time no see - we need to get you up to the Compound, get some training in," Sam said with a broad smile.

“And we could look at that research I was telling you about,” Dr Banner added.

Peter hadn't been up to the Compound since the Battle. He'd seen pictures of the rebuild but he still felt odd about going there – the place where he'd seen Tony die. It made his stomach flip every time he thought of it. Still, the idea of training with everyone, whilst getting away from Kevin, was too good to miss.

“That would be awesome,” Peter grinned back.

“You know Bucky and I are getting used to teaming up now, I reckon we can get you down this time,” Sam said, with a side smile. “It'd be a good match up.”

Peter looked at him nervously, remembering the fight in Germany. He looked to Tony at the mention of Bucky's name but maybe it was the time that had passed (for Tony at least) because his mention didn't seem to bother him. Tony looped his arm around Peter's shoulder; his tie hung loosely around his neck and at this distance, Peter could smell the alcohol on him – indulging in the champagne tonight like so many others.

“I don't know about that. The kid's a little rusty at the moment,” Tony said.

Peter whipped his head around to him. “I am?!”

Tony's hand squeezed his neck. “Yep, his reflexes are so rusty that Clint's kid shot him in the arm with an arrow!”

“What?!” Sam flustered and Dr Banner's eyebrows shot up.

“Tony!” Peter whined, throwing his head back.

Clint was positively bubbling with laughter. “Cooper convinced him to shoot something out of his hands and then missed. We walked in on my two looking like they were going to puke and Peter, blood everywhere, looking like a deer in headlights.”

Both Dr Banner and Sam burst out laughing. Rhodey smiled widely but he'd already heard this

story.

Peter felt his face burn as he grumbled. “It wasn’t exactly like that...”

Tony squeezed his shoulder as this seemed to make it even funnier and his laugh radiated through his arm and into Peter’s body.

“I thought you said he was a genius, Stark. I didn’t have him pegged as a troublemaker too,” Sam’s voice boomed.

“A troublemaker?” Kevin’s voice raised from behind and Peter turned to see May and Kevin behind him.

“You didn’t blow up Tony’s lab again, did you?” May said, her eyes crinkled into a smile. “You smelt like smoke for a week.”

The group snickered again, and Peter squirmed. “That was like, one time.”

“So, what did he do this time?” Kevin’s voice probably sounded neutral to the group, but Peter felt it’s edge.

“The boys were mucking around and it got a bit dangerous,” explained Clint, thankfully seeming to understand that Kevin didn’t know about Peter’s healing abilities and therefore not giving details.

“But don’t worry Mr Hayes,” Tony’s arm pulled him in tighter again as he swayed slightly on his feet. “We made sure there was punishment.”

Kevin’s eyebrows raised at that. “That’s good to know.”

“Yeah, next time you come to visit Pete, be sure to do it again; my wood pile has never been so high.” Clint joked and punched him in the arm.

Peter was thankful when the conversation moved on and he was able to slip away to the bathroom.

The trip to the Compound was on his mind as he relieved himself. Maybe he could convince Tony to let him try one of the Iron Man suits this time. He'd been subtly dropping hints for months; well, before the whole Snap actually. Tony seemed more mellowed now, maybe he would say yes.

As he zipped his pants up and turned around, he stopped short seeing Kevin leaning up against the sinks. Watching him: waiting.

A toilet flushed from the stalls behind and a man came out, so Peter took the time to wash his hands, the other guy coming out and doing the same. Kevin just stood there and fiddled with his phone while they did. Peter tried to slip out with the other guy, but Kevin held up a hand.

"Let me fix your tie Pete," Kevin's voice was warm and nurturing.

The other man smiled warmly at them as he exited, as if he was seeing a father and son together. Peter's heart rate climbed steadily as Kevin fiddled with the tie around his neck; aware of the other man's tight muscles. As soon as the sound of the door shutting came, Kevin wrenched Peter forward with his tie in his hand, the fabric squeezing his throat.

"You're getting in trouble when I'm not around, huh?"

"It wasn't like that," Peter pushed out: trying to breathe as the tie dug into his neck.

Kevin's hold tightened and his other hand gripped Peter's shoulder.

"That's bad enough, but then I have to hear that Tony fucking Stark has been disciplining you. That's not his place." Kevin's voice was a controlled growl. "That's mine."

Kevin pushed him back by his neck up against the wall; the edge of the paper towel dispenser ramming into his back.

"We'll talk about it more at home, hey?" Kevin's voice sounded almost friendly, but it only added to the sense Peter had that this was the angriest he had ever been.

The door swung open then and Kevin released him instantly, turning towards the sinks and running

the water as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

It was Clint that came around the divide and smiled at them. Peter smoothed down his crumpled tie and swallowed.

“Alright, guys?”

Peter took a shaky breath before nodding with a fake smile. His eyes darted to Kevin’s back, before he moved towards the door and left the two men in the bathroom. His breath came out in short spurts as he tried to get it under control.

Where was Tony? He needed to talk to Tony.

Peter zeroed in on him over by the bar; his arm around Pepper now, a drunk smile plastered on his face. He jogged over there.

“Hey – um – would you guys mind if I stayed another night?” Peter burst out, trying to sound calm. He couldn’t go back and deal with this tonight. Kevin might have calmed down by tomorrow. Whatever tomorrow brought he’d deal with, but he just didn’t want to do it today. Although Kevin had never done anything when May was at home, he hadn’t seen him so riled up before.

Both Pepper and Tony’s eyebrows raised at Peter.

“I- uh- wanted to spend more time with Cooper and Lila before they have to go home,” he added, in case he needed an explanation.

“You’re always welcome Peter, you know that,” Pepper said, “and Morgan will be thrilled.”

“Don’t eat all the pancakes before I get up though,” Tony said with a smirk, “and go check with Aunt May.”

“Thanks,” he smiled, starting to relax.

He scanned the room, looking for May but at the same time catching that Kevin had made it back into the ballroom. He spotted May and started to make his way there as fast as he could without looking like he was running. Kevin started coming towards May too and Peter sped up, getting there before him.

“Can I please stay at the Tower tonight so I can see Cooper and Lila before they go?” Peter’s words rushed out in one breath.

May smiled, “Of course, it’s lovely you’re all getting on well. I want you home by noon, though so you get all your homework done.”

Kevin arrived then.

“Thanks Aunt May,” he kissed her on the cheek and headed off in search of the others, putting as much distance between himself and Kevin as he could.

Tony

God, he loved a party. It had been a while since he’d been to one and although metal was more his thing, he enjoyed dancing to old Motown with his beautiful wife. He’d drunk more than he was used to lately and that meant that he slept more than usual but when he did, he woke with a cluster of pain behind his eyes that was seeping into his skull.

The space next to him was empty and the bedroom clock showed that it was 9.53am. Yikes. The Barton’s had gone back with Peter around midnight and he and Pepper had kept dancing until she dragged him home about 2am. After some nocturnal activities, he must have been out by 3.30am. Wow, he couldn’t remember the last time he had slept 6 hours.

After a quick shower, he headed into the kitchen to find it filled with people. The Barton’s and Morgan sat at the table eating pancakes. Pepper was making coffee and approached him then with

a steaming cup.

“I’m not sure that I have ever loved you more,” Tony said as he wrapped his hand around the warm cup.

Pepper’s lips twitched, “You do realise that the last time you said that was in the delivery room...”

“Oops,” he said, trying a devilish grin, “to be fair, my love for coffee has never been a secret.’

She rolled her eyes before kissing him on the cheek. “Rhodey had to shoot off, sends his goodbyes.”

“Platypus left without hugs?!” Tony said, as he came up behind Morgan and kissed the top of her head.

“Uncle Rhodey gave me a hug, Daddy,” she said, mid mouthful.

“Well, aren’t you special,” grumbled Tony.

“Yep!” she replied with the unending confidence only a 4-year-old could have.

There was a chuckle from the adults in the room.

“I have a vague memory that Peter was coming back last night?” Tony said.

“I’m surprised you can remember anything,” Laura chuckled. “He’s in there. Asleep.” Laura inclined her head to the living room.

“Are the beds provided not comfortable now?”

Tony walked to the entrance to the living room. The kid was curled up in the corner of the sofa,

his schoolbooks open on the coffee table in front of him and a blanket slung over him. Pepper had bought it and insisted it stay there as Peter was always cold and it stopped him dragging his duvet from the bedroom in here every time they watched a movie.

“FRIDAY, why is Peter in here?”

“He woke in distress at 4.33am and came in here shortly after.”

“A nightmare? Why didn’t you wake me?”

“Mr Parker insisted that you not be woken Boss.” The AI sounded defensive.

“Of course he did,” Tony hummed, taking a look at the mess of curls sticking out the top of the blanket, “if that happens again, override his request.”

“Yes, Boss.”

Nightmares again. Peter rarely spoke about what they were about, and Tony knew he should push more, but then that was hypocritical, wasn’t it? He didn’t like retelling his own. He made a mental note to talk to May about it. Peter still seemed shattered despite cutting back his patrol hours and if he was having regular nightmares, then that was probably why.

Tony felt Pepper come in behind him. “Aww,” she said on seeing Peter’s crumpled form. “Should we wake him for pancakes?”

Tony turned, putting an arm around her waist. “Nah, let the Spiderling sleep.”

He closed the door quietly. Yep, he was definitely going to have to talk to May.

Peter

Peter supposed that he took after May with regards to his time management skills. He watched from the table as he finished his food as she ran around getting all the things she needed for her shift. Alfie was watching cartoons on the TV and he barely looked up as she planted a kiss on his head. She whisked her way over to Peter next, doing the same.

Peter watched as she shoved her feet into her ratty trainers.

“Babe, I’m going.”

Kevin came out of the bedroom then, a tank top and jeans on. He enveloped her in a hug, and she returned him with a kiss on the lips.

“Bye all my boys!” She’d taken to saying that every time that she had to leave. Come to think of it, it occurred to Peter that it could’ve been something that she had always said when he was gone.

The door closed and Kevin sat down on the sofa next to Alfie. He hadn’t spoken much to Peter since he’d gotten back from the Tower, but he hadn’t made any passive aggressive jibes either.

Peter got up and cleared the remaining stuff from the kitchen table and into the sink, washing it all up as quickly as possible.

“Daddy, can I have a banana?” Peter heard Alfie’s voice as he finished up the final plate.

“Sure buddy,” Kevin replied. “Peter, you mind grabbing a banana for Alfie?”

His voice was light and calm and he didn’t look at Peter as he came over and handed it to Alfie who took it with delight.

His light tone continued. “Hey Pete?” Peter turned round to see his face now, his lips a hard line, but his tone no different. “Go and wait for me in your room.”

The food in his stomach felt like it had plummeted to icy depths and his breath was short as he

stumbled his way back into his room, closing the door behind him. Kevin hadn't forgotten.

The rest of the evening was torturous. His attention was focused on the sounds in the apartment – he heard every time Kevin moved; when he went to the bathroom, he heard him bath Alfie and put him to bed, he heard him laughing as he watched an old sitcom. The hours ticked by, but Peter got nothing good done; he couldn't focus on his work, just the movements in the apartment. Both Tony and Ned rang him, but he was too scared to make any noise in case that was all it took for Kevin to think of him.

It was almost 11pm when he heard the footsteps approaching and stopping outside his room. He jumped up from his desk though he didn't know why; there wasn't anywhere else to go.

Kevin opened the door swiftly before coming in and closing it softly. He had a belt in his right hand and a grim expression on his face.

It had only been two weeks since he had felt that on his back and the memory was vivid. Peter felt bile tickle the back of his throat.

“Take your shirt off and put your hands against the wall.” Kevin's voice was dull but firm.

Peter tried to reason with him. “Kevin, I, uh, it wasn't a big deal really. Tony was just messing around.”

Kevin levelled him with a dark stare. “He said you did something dangerous and then you came home and lied about. Stark's idea of punishment must be as pathetic as he is, since I caught you sneaking in here late the very next day.”

Peter didn't know what to say when it became apparent that he'd made his mind up.

“Hands up against the wall. I won't ask again.”

Peter's hands shook as he pulled his top over his head and dropped it to the ground. As he put his arms up against the wall, he saw Kevin wind part of the thick leather belt around his hand: he was starting with the buckle this time. Peter registered the rest of his body starting to shake as he closed his eyes and waited.

The first blow fell across his shoulders, the buckle slamming into the shoulder blade: the force pushing him closer to the wall. He took in a sharp breath as the pain registered in his body.

“You have any idea how fucking embarrassing it was last night?”

The belt hit again: fire along his spine.

“Watching him float around the room with all of the other Avengers there, like they expect to be worshiped liked Gods.”

This time it landed around his waist.

“Then Stark lauding it over me that the kid I’m in charge of has been out of line.”

The buckle came down harder this time and Peter felt when it sliced through his skin: blood starting to drip down his skin.

“Were you trying to humiliate me?”

He slammed it again and Peter wasn’t sure if he was going to be able to stand up much longer; his legs wobbled beneath him. Pain coursed through his back; he just wanted it to end.

“No, I’m sorry, it won’t h-happen again.” Peter turned to look at him now: his eyes pleading with him to stop. “You don’t need to do this.”

“I don’t?” Kevin snorted: his eyes filled with hate. “Were they lying? *Did* you do something dangerous?”

Peter nodded slowly. He had done. Something really stupid.

“Then you are getting what you deserve.”

Maybe he was. He should've known better. How was he ever going to be an Avenger if he couldn't even say no to a dare? Despite that thought, he wanted the beating to end; pleading had worked last time and he was in too much pain to be above it.

"Please, I've learned my lesson. I-I'll be better. Please stop."

"Shut up," Kevin boomed, swinging the belt wider now. His aim was off and Peter managed to dodge slightly so the buckle didn't connect with his skull but instead it caught around his throat. He stumbled away from the wall, his hands clasped to his throat as if that would stop the pain: his heart racing as his throat felt like it was closing up.

Kevin grabbed him by the hair then, slamming a fist into his face before he threw him to the ground; barely pausing before sending a tirade of kicks into his side. He couldn't really hear the hateful words that Kevin was ranting, but he heard the crack followed by his own howl as one of his ribs snapped. Kevin madly lashed at him with the belt, but the pain didn't really register past that of his throat and ribs.

He sensed Kevin back away and felt the gust of air as the door was slammed shut.

What am I doing?

What am I letting this happen?

Is this what I deserve?

Peter couldn't move from the spot and he tried to remember a good memory or feeling: anything to take his focus off the pain. Tony laughing at his science puns, Alfie squashed on his lap, Morgan's hand in his, May wrapping her arms around him when he came back. He let out a shuddering breath as he tried to get in control of the pain.

He was half aware of his phone ringing somewhere: the ringtone followed by the faint buzz where it vibrated. Moving was out of the question and even if he could get it, what would he say to whoever it was? If he spoke to anyone now – *could he even with how sore his throat felt?* - they would know something was wrong. He couldn't do that.

For May. For Alfie. For the Splodge.

Tony

Tony was busy tinkering with an engine. He knew Peter wouldn't accept a new car from him so he'd started to build something from scratch for his birthday present. It'd been on his mind since after Peter left, so when the others decided to go for more sightseeing, he'd opted out and come down to the workshop. It was now dinner time and he knew that Pepper would be calling him upstairs soon to join them all, before the Bartons had to get back to Missouri.

"Boss, Mr Barton is outside requesting access."

"Let him in, FRI."

The door opened immediately, and a slightly dishevelled looking Clint came walking in.

"Since when is this door locked?" Clint asked, as he came up to the station Tony was working at.

"Since Morgan decided the old suits could be potential playmates."

"Ahh," said Clint, his voice humming with recognition, "they do like to get into everything."

There was a pause and Tony looked over at Clint who was staring at a spot on the wall. He went closer and took the framed photo of Peter and Morgan that Pepper had put up, and looked at it for a long moment, before putting it back down.

"What's up?" Tony said. Clint gave him a weary look. "Not that I don't like visitors, but you don't exactly make a habit of lab visits."

Clint ran a hand over his face before coming over to lean against the workstation next to Tony.

“Spit it out, Merida.”

Clint rolled his eyes but then leaned forward towards Tony.

“Do you see much of Peter?”

“Sure, he comes in for lab days a few times a week. We text.” Tony said. “Why?”

Tony watched Clint’s face; he seemed to be struggling to find the right words, which was not something he was used to with Clint. He was usually full of jest and one-liners.

“Does Peter seem a bit...edgy to you?”

Tony had noticed it, sure. He’d asked Peter if he was ok a few times, but the answers had been the same. “Stressed about School, not sleeping great, busy with Spider-man.” He hadn’t seen him as much the last few weeks, but he put that down to the conversation they’d had about him getting more rest. He was glad the kid was taking his advice for once.

“Yeah, but the kid has been through a lot. May said he’s finding it hard coming back to a whole new family. I think he was finding it all a bit much, nightmares, so I told him to cut back on patrol a bit; hopefully that’ll help.”

“No shit, having mine back is like walking into a dream every morning.” Clint’s eyes darkened. “Like every moment of the five years before wasn’t reality.”

The sentence hung as both men had their own thoughts about what they’d all been through because of Thanos.

“The look on his face sometimes though. I’ve seen it before. I think you know it too.” Tony’s eyes met Clint’s which were full of a mixture of pain and contempt. “Your Dad was a piece of work too, right?”

The two men had never spoken of their father's before, but had gleaned enough to know that they had a shared experience in that respect.

Tony's eyes darted back over to the photo of Peter.

"What are you saying...?" Tony's sentence hovered like he couldn't bear to finish the thought.

Clint sat back with his hands in the air in a surrender pose.

"It may be something, it may be nothing. It's just, yesterday, I came into the bathroom and he was in there with May's husband. As soon as I walked in it went quiet, and he looked well, haunted." Clint rubbed his fist on his chest in a self-soothing way. "I couldn't shake it while I was trying to sleep last night. So, today I asked Cooper and Lila if he'd ever talked about his step-uncle and they said that they heard him shouting at Peter when they were on a video call one time and that Peter described him as '*a major asshole*'."

Tony sat up at that. Peter just didn't talk about people like that – not even the criminals he webbed up.

"What has he said to you about May's husband?" Clint asked.

Tony felt something drop in his stomach. He thought about all the time had spent with Peter one on one since the Battle; at the cabin, in the lab.

"He never talks about Kevin."

Never.

The kid who talks non-stop about everything.

Tony pictured Kevin from the few times they had met. He was a bit stiff but seemed alright. But he didn't know him. Not really.

“When I started thinking, it made me reassess how he was when he came to the farm.” Clint carried on. “Generally jumpy. He cringed when I moved his arm during archery. Then after their incident, I could see why, as he had bruises there...round, finger-shaped bruises...”

“And his stomach,” Tony remembered from that day. “I just assumed they were from patrol.”

“I thought so too, but now I’m thinking if they were from patrol, why try to cover them when swimming?” Clint said. “And then remember when he jumped up to defend Cooper. It was like he thought...”

“...it was like he thought you were going to hit him.” Tony finished off the sentence Clint couldn’t complete. Tony then stopped. “But what are we talking about here. He is Spider-man. He could snap Kevin’s neck if he wanted to.”

“You really see Peter doing that? He seems more of the protective type.”

May and Alfie. Peter would protect his family in any way that he thought he had to.

“May is pregnant again,” Tony said, closing his eyes for a moment. “Fuck.”

A weight hit Tony as he saw it all align then. The skittishness. The deep tiredness he seemed to be trying to cover up whenever he came over. The weight loss he said was a growth spurt.

“I surprised him after school last week, and he had some bruises; said they were from a quick lunchtime patrol. Wow, I believed that shit.”

Tony threw down the wrench in his hand and went to press the button on his chest to open the suit, but Clint caught his hand.

Tony frowned at him. “What are you-?”

“Take a moment, Tony.”

“To do what? I need to know what’s going on.”

Clint didn’t let go.

“You can’t charge in there, full Iron Man.”

“I can. I can find out why he’s been lying.”

Clint let go of him and he shook out his arms.

“Why did we lie, Tony? I sure as hell didn’t tell anyone what was happening. I just got the fuck out of there as soon as I could.”

“Then why hasn’t he? He knows he could come to me.” Tony’s voice dropped further. “He knows that, right?”

Tony looked at Clint with so much horror in his eyes that it made Clint's stomach turn.

Clint’s voice softened. “I see you with him. I think he knows you care, Tone.”

Tony’s heart clenched and it was like a thousand bees had been released into his stomach.

“Look, we don’t know for certain. The bathroom thing could’ve been nothing – the other stuff could be a school bully. You go over there and try to make him tell you something, that could go sideways real quick. We’ve got no proof.” Clint sat back on the work table; his arms crossed tightly. “Besides, I could be way off base. Projecting, or whatever the quacks call it.”

But Clint was a spy; he might not be able to spot a lie at 100ft like Nat could, but he wasn’t far off. If he thought something was off, then it was. Tony just knew, in his gut, that Clint’s hunch was right.

Eek so originally the last 'Tony' section I had as the beginning of my next chapter but at the last minute I decided to incorporate it. Do you think it makes a better cliffhanger than ending with Peter battered by Kevin? Thoughts on a postcard...well a comment would be better :-)

Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Can't believe how many comments I woke up to this morning. Thank you all for the support!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tony

Tony had always known that patience was a virtue that he just did not possess. It had its positive effects – made him driven to get things done and cut through a lot of bullshit. But it was at times like these that he really could have done with a healthy dose of it.

Clint had managed to convince him that they needed to tread carefully. Which was the only reason why he hadn't gone over there right away. Whatever it was that was going on – and Tony was convinced that *something* was - Peter was keeping it to himself and must have a reason. And according to Clint, '*because he is an idiot*' was not it.

Tony's patience threshold was not helped by the simple fact that Peter refused to answer his video calls. He'd replied with a short text saying that he had to catch up on homework after his weekend at the Tower, and he'd call him back tomorrow. After another unanswered call around 11pm, Tony had lost the little patience he had - *why didn't he want to show his face?* - and had rang again. This time he was intent on forcing his call through – thank Thor for his superior tech – only to be notified by FRIDAY that Peter's phone was not currently on.

Context is everything, right? He tried to view this information in context; the kid often forgot to charge his phone, so this was not new. Context helped Clint convince him not to go barging over there to blast Kevin to kingdom come. Context did not help him sleep.

—

Tony sat in the car now, his leg bumping up and down.

“I don’t get why we had to be here so bloody early,” Happy grumbled again from the front. “Why won’t you let me pull up closer? He won’t see us from here.”

That’s the point.

Tony wanted to observe him from afar at first. Picking him up, well, Tony had wanted to make sure the kid couldn’t turn lab time down again. He was pretty sure that Peter wouldn’t say no to his face. The kid still looked up to him enough that he wouldn’t want to do that. At least he hoped that was the case: he felt unsure about how well he knew Peter right now.

The bell sounded loudly enough that he could hear it faintly from here. Tony’s eyes worked feverishly beneath his tinted glasses searching for the kid. Then he remembered he had technology.

“FRIDAY, track Peter’s phone.”

“Yes, Boss.” There was only a moment’s hesitation. “He’s inside the building, moving slowly in this direction.”

Ok, so he is definitely here. Not off school recovering from injuries.

Tony let go of the breath he was holding and tried to relax. He wanted the kid to be as relaxed as possible.

Tony saw him come out through the door, his backpack hanging low. Wearing a turtleneck - in May. Tony’s stomach clenched. He watched the kid swing his backpack up onto his back, barely concealing a wince.

“Now Happy,” Tony ordered.

Happy grumbled under his breath, but pulled the sleek Audi in front of the steps of the school.

Peter saw it and his brow wrinkled. He moved towards the car seemingly knowing it wasn't for anyone else.

Happy rolled the window down.

"Hey Happy, I'm sorry but I think you've got the wrong da - " Peter stopped as the back seat window rolled down to reveal Tony.

"Oh, hey Mr S—, hey Tony." Tony watched as Peter pulled his sleeves over his wrists. "Today isn't a lab day."

"Change of plans, kid. Got some stuff I wanted your help on."

"I can't! Sorry, it's my turn to make dinner." Peter's eyes darted away.

Tony waved the phone at Peter. "I squared it away with Aunt May. Let's go."

"Oh," Peter didn't seem much relieved by that, but started getting in.

Tony wasn't lying. He had spoken to May earlier. He'd been partially honest: told her that he was worried about Peter and that he didn't seem himself lately. May had also been worried about him – said that he has been withdrawn, having nightmares and not eating as much. She thought he was still finding it hard to adjust to being back. She had sounded genuinely concerned, not like someone trying to hide something. Maybe she didn't know what was going on. Maybe there wasn't anything going on at all. Maybe this was teenage stuff.

Turtleneck in May.

Tony watched as Peter settled himself slowly into the car; his body tensing as he sat back. There were a few moments of quiet in the car as Happy manoeuvred through the traffic and Tony felt something inside him that he wasn't used to. Uncertainty. He had to get this right. To get Peter to trust him. His stomach hurt. *Peter didn't trust him.* That was a sucker punch.

"So Petey," The kid's head snapped over to look at him, his breath hitching. "How was school

today?”

“It was fine.” Peter turned back to the view of the window, closing his eyes as he leant against the window.

There was the biggest difference, right now. Usually Peter would have been non-stop talking, telling him about how his Spanish test was, what Lego Ned and he were going to do next and how MJ had half-smiled at him today. As well as all the stuff in-between that no one wanted to know, like the colour of his Maths teacher’s sweater vest and the mystery meat at lunch.

But now he was quiet. As much as Tony would sometimes have welcomed it from the teenager, now it simply felt unnerving. Peter had always been his chattiest when it was just the two of them in the lab. Hence the plan. If you could call it that.

The traffic was busy and the ride slow. Peter’s arm fell deeper into his lap and Tony realised that he was asleep. He must have been exhausted to fall asleep at this time of day. He hadn’t been out in the suit for a few days – Tony had checked with Karen - so he knew that wasn’t why. God, the other week he had talked to him about ‘work-life balance’ like a total asshole.

Tony ran his eyes over every inch of him now that he could do so unnoticed. He knew that the fading yellow mark on his cheek wasn’t there at the party two days ago. Shit, he shouldn’t have listened to Clint, he should’ve gone over there last night. With his healing factor, that meant it happened late last night or this morning, right? But Tony knew it didn’t work well when he was stressed or tired or not eating enough for his ridiculous metabolism. He had definitely dropped some weight.

How did I not notice this?

The car came to a stop, but Peter didn’t stir.

“Hap, stay with the kid, leave the engine running.”

Happy turned around from the driver’s seat and clocked Peter.

“You want me to drive the baby around to keep him asleep.”

Tony didn't smile back. "He looks like he needs it."

By the time Tony got in the elevator, his stomach acid was riding high in his throat. He needed to regroup himself. To get his plan together. What was his plan again? Anything to do with Peter being hurt and he couldn't think straight.

"FRIDAY, let me know when Peter enters the building."

"Yes, Boss."

Tony headed for the kitchen area. He would need a drink to get through this.

The archer was sat up on the kitchen counter, sharpening some knives.

"Barton. What are you doing here?"

Clint didn't bother to answer him. "Did you talk to him yet?"

"He's asleep in the car." Tony rested his weight against the granite counter. "He'll be up in a bit."

"What's the plan, Stark?"

Tony faltered.

Clint's eyes widened. "You always have a plan."

Tony's shoulders sank. "Yeah, but..."

“But this is Peter.” Clint held his eyes for a moment, before pulling himself off the counter and heading to the coffee machine.

“So, you might not have a plan, but I know you, you’ve done a shit load of research. So, what did you find out?”

Research, yes, that was easier to talk about.

“He hasn’t been out in the suit all that much in the past few weeks – I watched the videos from the few days before he came to the farm and there was no one who got close enough to him to cause the stomach or arm bruising. Hacked the school cameras – had FRIDAY isolate any images of Peter. No school bullies seem to be targeting him at the moment, at least not physically. So, that crossed off that possibility. Which leaves - “

“- the wonderful step uncle.” Clint finished off.

Tony opened up the holographic images and flicked through the files he had collated.

“Geez, did you even sleep last night?”

“You think I was going to get any sleep after the thought you put in my head?” Tony raised an eyebrow at him.

Clint looked up. “Maybe I shouldn’t have mentioned it. I could’ve just gone to have a word with this guy myself.”

“No!” Tony almost shouted. “He’s my...intern. I should handle it.” Clint rolled his eyes at the intern comment, but passed over a cup of coffee to Tony which he took with a thankful nod. He truly wanted something stronger, but this was probably best. Drinking reminded him too much of Howard; long nights of shouting and slaps.

“Prime suspect is Kevin Hayes, 44. Married May Parker four years ago, Alfie arriving a few months later. He’s been an NYPD officer for 10 years – made Sergeant five years ago. Parents in New Jersey. He doesn’t visit all that much. No criminal history. There are some juvenile records,

but they were sealed...”

Tony paused to look at Clint, who raised an eyebrow. “...which of course I hacked. A few petty crimes, but then big time GBH, aged 17. Broke some other kid’s ribs and two bones in his arm. Got off on some technicality and a ‘boys will be boys’ judgement.”

“Shit.” Clint chewed on his lip. “Well, still, it’s not much to indicate he might be a domestic abuser.”

“You never can tell. My Dad was the ‘legend’ Howard Stark, but nobody knew how many times he broke my nose.”

Clint huffed out an angry breath as his old friend’s admittance and unconsciously ran a hand over his own nose. “It always hurts just as bad as the first time.”

Tony nodded glumly.

“So, what are you going to say to him?”

“I was going to lead with ‘*Why the hell didn’t you tell me, you idiot?*’”

“Tony...”

Tony ran his hand through his beard.

“The most pressing thing is to see if he’s hurt today. I think he might be - he was carrying himself differently but trying to hide it. He hasn’t been out on patrol since Wednesday so he shouldn’t be hurt. I’ve got a new suit to try on him anyway – if he gets it on, then FRIDAY can run a scan. See if your hunch is right.”

“And if it shows nothing? That doesn’t mean something hasn’t happened before.”

“Then I’ll see if I can coax it out of him I guess. Or ask him directly. I’m not sure he will be able

to lie to my face.” Did he know that? Tony wasn’t sure of anything right now.

“Peter is in the elevator, Boss.” The AI’s voice sounded serious, as if she knew the situation.

“Right, super hearing so—“ Tony made a gesture of zip it.

Clint nodded. “I’ll be out here if you need back up.”

The door to the elevator opened and out came Peter. He’d been here only yesterday yet he looked utterly different – the dark bags around his eyes highlighting the signs of fatigue that showed in how he moved across the room.

“Oh hey, Mr Barton,” said Peter, rubbing some sleep from his eye. “I thought you went home yesterday?”

“The others did. I had some stuff to sort out. You guys headed down to the lab?”

“Yes, we are.” Tony grabbed an apple and threw it at Peter. “Heads up.”

It was quite out of range for a normal person, but Peter caught it: not without a cringe. Tony and Clint shared a quick look.

“That was a terrible throw.” Peter recovered his expression quickly and gave him a half smile before taking a bite of the apple.

“What can I say, I never excelled at athletics. Everything else, yes...”

Clint groaned and rolled his eyes. “Pizza later?”

Peter’s face lit up. “With pineapple?”

Both older men made a face. “You can have a whole one of those to yourself, weirdo. Come on, let’s get to work.”

Peter

Peter started to feel more relaxed as he settled himself in at the workshop. He’d hated missing lab days with Tony, but Kevin seemed to despise Tony - *how can you hate someone that saved half the universe?* - and he tried to placate him by not coming as much. Luckily, Tony had noticed his tiredness and been happy for him to cut back his sessions for a while.

Kevin wouldn’t be happy about this unplanned excursion, even if May had okayed it. He tried not to think about the reception he might get when he came home later. Maybe he wouldn’t be too harsh on him after what he did last night? School had been a blur again - the pain in his ribs had lessened as the day progressed, but his back was killing him and he could feel it hadn’t healed much, which was a little worrying. His healing factor had always been temperamental, but lately it was just plain stubborn.

He looked over at Tony who was hunkered over the arm of one of the suits, trying to improve some perceived imperfection he’d found. That was one of the things that Peter admired about Tony. He never rested on his laurels. He was always trying to improve, move forward, progress. Peter wanted to imitate that in his life.

There he was falling asleep in the car on the way here like a little kid. *Ugh*. The mortification from earlier caused a spike of heat in his cheeks.

“What’s swirling around in that big old head, kid?” He glanced up to see Tony looking at him with a soft smile wrinkling his eyes.

“I was just – sorry about falling asleep earlier. You didn’t have to have Happy drive me around, you could’ve just woken me up.” Peter opted for the truth.

“But you looked so cute...” Tony’s voice sprinkled with sarcasm.

Peter stuck his tongue out at him which elicited a sharp laugh from the older man. Peter smiled back – still finding it amazing when he managed to make his mentor happy.

“Come help me with this,” Tony gestured to the arm and Peter all but threw what he was working on down and came over to the workbench.

“Hold it still for a minute.” Peter held the arm down as Tony tightened an awkwardly situated screw. He tried really hard to contain a yawn which came out of nowhere.

“Why so tired, Pete?” Tony put the screwdriver down and looked at him in a way that made Peter felt exposed.

You couldn't keep your mouth shut, so I got my ass handed to me.

“Oh, patrol ran late and then I had homework due.”

Before Tony could respond, Peter heard his ringtone blast out. He shot over to the other desk and grabbed it. *Kevin.*

“Sorry, I have to get this...” Peter looked at Tony whose gaze flickered for a moment before he waved him on. He pressed the green button.

“Where the hell are you?” Kevin’s voice was loud, and Peter pressed it to his ear to try to keep the sound away from Tony, before moving across to the other side of the room.

“I-I’m at the internship. May said it was ok.” Pete jumped in with that hopefully placating information.

“You don’t normally go on a Monday.”

“No, but Mr Stark wanted me to help him with something.”

“The great Tony Stark needs *your* help?” The derision in his voice couldn’t be more evident.

“I guess,” Peter said quietly.

The man on the other end of the phone grunted before talking again in a lower voice. “Perhaps we’ll talk more about this when you get home.”

A shiver went down Peter’s neck and he had to fight to stop tears coming into his eyes.

“Y-yes sir,” he mumbled.

“Jesus, you know I hate the stuttering.”

“Yes sir,” repeated Peter, extra clearly this time.

The call ended without a goodbye. Peter clutched the phone to his forehead for a second and took a calming breath. *May. Alfie. The Splodge.*

Feeling more centred, he turned around and headed over to Tony, whose head was thankfully still hunched over the gauntlet.

“Good timing,” Tony murmured, “same thing again.”

Peter held the arm down as Tony tweaked something before sitting back and cricking his neck.

“Was that May’s husband, Kelvin?” Tony chuckled the wrench into the tray.

“Kevin,” Peter corrected, unable to keep the bitterness out of that single word.

Tony raised an eyebrow. “You don’t mention him much. You don’t like him?”

Peter shrugged. He didn't want to outright lie, but he couldn't bring himself to pretend that he liked Kevin.

“Wow, an answer like that from you who likes everyone; must mean he's an ass.” Tony threw a light smile at him, but his eyes held concern.

Peter didn't want to think about Kevin. When he was here, he just wanted to forget that side of his life. “He's fine. So, what are we working on next?”

Tony

Being subtle didn't come easy to Tony Stark, and this gentle probing was testing him more greatly than he cared to admit. He just wanted to grab Peter by the shoulders and say; *'I know what is going on; now let me go and kill this guy.'*

Judging by how Peter was deflecting his questioning, he wasn't going to get any more from him right now by talking. He obviously didn't like the guy, so home was probably tough going right now. Maybe that was all it was. What he'd heard from that phone call didn't sound good, though maybe they'd had an argument about dirty dishes or something mundane. Still...*Turtleneck in May*. God, he had never wanted to be more wrong about something in his entire life.

The kid was shut down tight right now: talking wasn't going to be forthcoming. Time for plan B.

“So, are you ready to see the few adjustments I made to your next suit?”

The kid's face lit up and Tony felt it in his heart. Tony pulled up the schematics and showed the kid, who was now effervescent, talking about all the different ideas he had for the one after this one. This was the Peter he knew.

“I want to test a few bits out whilst it’s on, so suit up.” He handed the suit to the kid, who looked hesitant but then started towards the bathroom.

“Where are you going?”

The kid usually just stripped off in front of him – hell, he usually gets changed in random alleyways – now he’s suddenly body conscious? Tony felt his heart rate go up a notch.

“Need to pee first.” Peter sent him a nervous grin and continued on his way. The door closed and Tony tapped on his glasses.

“Remember the plan, FRI. As soon as he gets the suit on, start the body scan and send the results to my earpiece and then any other footage to the...”.

“..to the Protect Peter Parker file. Yes, Boss. The suit is on. Activating scan.”

Peter came out that moment; the suit hugging all the way up to his chin.

“You didn’t give me the mask.”

Tony didn’t want Karen telling him what FRIDAY was up to.

“Er no, not necessary right now. How do the fingertips feel? I was playing around with a slightly different tension in the fabric to see if it helped you stick any better to stuff.”

Peter looked impressed with that. Tony was stalling for time, but that at least was true. He watched Peter go to the wall by the bathroom and start to climb up- releasing one hand at a time testing the strength. Tony walked towards him as he finally jumped down.

“I think it is a little stronger actually. Good idea!” Peter’s smile was wide.

“Results are in, Boss.” FRIDAY’s voice intoned in his ear.

“Umm hmm. Drink, Pete?” Tony started walking away towards the kitchenette. He knew the kid’s super-hearing shouldn’t be able to reach to the earpiece and the frequency he had it on, but they’d never fully tested it, and he didn’t want to take any chances.

“Yes please – you got a coke?”

“All the better for rotting your teeth. Hey, check out the aesthetics in the mirror- let me know if it passes the Gen Z test.”

Peter laughed, but headed to the doorway of the bathroom to check it out.

Tony opened the fridge and stuck his head in it.

“Give me the highlights, FRI,” he muttered.

“Peter has several bruises on his neck, arms and a large bruise on his left side which correlates with his internal scan showing a partially healed rib fracture. Based on previous knowledge of his healing factor, this would have occurred in the last 3 days.”

Tony knew that he hadn’t been out in the suit for at least five days.

“On his back he has multiple lacerations and bruises in a patterned fashion. Pattern identified as most likely to be from a belt or leather implement.”

Tony’s blood chilled- far cooler than the fridge he was in. He’d expected some bruises, but not that. That made it worse for some reason – like he wasn’t just occasionally smacking him when he was lost it, but that this guy wanted to inflict pain and punishment. On *his* Peter.

He took in a breath, his hand trembling as he pulled two glass bottles out. He popped the lids off before he turned back around to the kid, who apparently had been chattering this whole time.

“- I think it’s way more iconic, but Ned thinks a black would be better as how many spiders are

there in the world that are blue? And I mean he was a point there, doesn't he? But I kind of feel like I'm established with these colours now, you know? I don't want to change them. What if I did and then someone thought I was a copycat or something?"

Tony strode over trying to keep his face calm and handed him the drink. He watched as Peter took a long gulp before setting it down. The kid had a track record of hiding bad injuries. And, what? He'd just been walking around all day with all this going on under his shirt? Tony needed to see it with his own eyes— to know how bad it was right now.

The teen was looking at him expectedly and Tony remembered that there had been a question in there somewhere.

"No one could imitate you. You're one of a kind, kid."

A rash of red spread through Peter's cheeks.

Tony stepped towards him, his legs shaking a little. "There was one other new feature I forgot to mention. A bit of a fail-safe; if something happens and you need to move quick..."

Tony put his hand on Peter's chest and pressed five points on the spider emblem on the front. The suit suddenly shrunk away from his body and into the spider until it was all gone; Tony catching it before it hit the ground.

His eyes darted down to Peter's body and widened as he took in the massive purple bruise that covered the left side of his body.

"Jesus, Peter."

Peter looked uncomfortable and tried to cover his ribs with his arm, but all that did was show an array of finger shaped bruises that ran up his tricep and some around his wrist.

"It was just a bad patrol last night. I didn't want to worry you. It should be gone by now; it will be by tomorrow, tops."

Tony tried not to let the anger leech into his voice. “You didn’t go out in the suit yesterday.”

“The night before then, whatever...” Peter picked up the coke bottle and took another sip, trying to act nonchalant and failing. Tony watched him gulp, his Adam’s apple moving the deep bruise along his throat.

“You were with me til Sunday morning.”

The kid definitely looked worried – no, more than that – frightened. Tony put his own bottle down on the side and ran his fingers around his beard before settling his eyes on Peter.

“We need to talk about Kevin.”

Chapter End Notes

Extra bonus points for anyone who got the reference of that last line lol. It might just be one of those things that was amusing in my own mind...!

Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

I am totally stunned that this story now has over 15,750 hits. Like, what? Incredible.
Thanks for the support 😊

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Peter

The glass bottle shattered without him realising that he'd even been squeezing it. He felt the sharp sting as shards pierced his skin and then warm blood coming forth; running down his arm.

“Shit, sorry.”

Tony lurched towards him, but Peter twisted away, tripping over himself and landing on the floor. Peter looked up to find Tony's horror filled face and felt his stomach drop out. His back must still look bad.

Shit, shit, shit.

He jumped up and stumbled into the wall, blood from his hand smearing on the wall.

Shit, shit, shit.

“Careful; your ribs,” Tony reached an arm out but didn't move closer.

“How do you kn - you scanned me?!” Peter felt heat rush through him. “Without my permission?”

“I was worried. And rightly so.” Tony's face held an expression on it that he had never seen

before. It was more than worry: it was concern and anger and – yes, that was it – *pity*.

Peter righted himself. He had to get out of here, *now*. Before he said anything. Before the plates he had been spinning for months came crashing down. He couldn't let that happen. *May, Alfie, The Splodge*.

He barrelled into the bathroom, shoving his feet into his sneakers and grabbing his clothes off the floor.

Tony was in the doorway; his hands splayed wide.

“Woah kid, just relax; we need to talk about this.”

Peter started putting it altogether.

“This whole day, picking me up from school; this has been a fucking ambush?” He was practically shouting now, but he didn't care.

“Peter...”

Peter didn't listen and pushed past Tony with his clothes still in his hands and started towards the door. He couldn't deal with this right now.

Tony was fast behind him.

“Stop Peter, Jesus.”

Peter yanked the door open with his free, non-bleeding hand, not caring that it almost hit Tony in the face. He didn't get far before Clint was coming down the hallway towards him.

Clint's eyes widened, no doubt at the sight in front of him. Peter was suddenly aware that he was only in his boxers, with blood dripping down his arm.

“What-the-fuck?” Clint’s words punctuated the air.

Peter hesitated before heading for the space past Clint. Clint zeroed in and started closing it off; his hands out in front of him like he was trying not to scare a wild animal. “Woah, woah. Hold your horses.”

Peter’s head snapped around hearing Tony’s footsteps and heavy breathing. With the two men either side of him, he backed up: his heels hitting the wall.

“I-I have to go. Just let me by Clint.”

Tony started; “Kid, we need to talk ab-”

Peter turned on Tony instantly. He’d fucked all this up. “Shut up, it’s none of your business.”

“Peter, *you* are my business.” Tony edged closer to him.

“Shut up!” Peter’s shout echoed in the marble hallway. He closed his eyes for a second and tried to keep the panic at bay: his heart was pounding so hard that he just couldn’t think. His eyes snapped open as both men took a half step towards him. There was nowhere else to go so he instinctively started to edge up the wall: his fingers sticking him with ease and his chest heaving with heavy breaths.

“Peter,” Clint’s voice was as soft as he’d ever heard it and as he looked over at him, he could see his expression was too. “You don’t have to talk about any of that right now, ok? Forget that. But we got to get that arm sorted out, before you bleed out.”

“It will heal soon,” Peter grumbled, his heart rate starting to decrease slightly.

“Yeah, but we don’t want it to heal with, what is it, glass?” Peter nodded just an inch. “If it heals with the glass inside, then it’s going to be fucking hell getting it out later. And you can’t use regular painkillers, right?”

Peter's resolve crumbled – his arm was hurting, a lot. He gave a short nod.

Clint straightened up a bit; his posture relaxed. "Come on, Medbay will have what we need to get it sorted, right Tony?"

Peter didn't look at Tony but heard him say gently, "Yeah."

Peter's arm really stung, and the bleeding wasn't letting up. He nodded glumly as he slid down the wall and trudged after Clint.

Tony

Tony stood in the corner of the room watching the silent boy who was sat, clutching a pile of blood-stained clothes, staring at the floor. This wasn't how this was supposed to go. He thought that once the kid understood that he knew, that he would open up, maybe even cry on his shoulder. He hadn't expected this – whatever *this* was.

Clint placed the medical tray on the hospital bed where Peter had perched on one end. He then gently took the clothes out of Peter's arms. Tony watched Clint frown as he took Peter's hand, before grabbing a swab and starting to clean up the excess blood. It had stopped dripping now at least. Clint held onto Peter's arm as he pulled over the bright light to shine on the wounds. Tony was relieved that even from here it looked like they were mostly small and superficial.

"Tony, can you see any glass in here?" He looked up at Clint, who raised his eyebrows and nodded his head slightly in a 'come over here' gesture. Tony came forward slowly and took a good look. He could see some, but small shards of glass were easy to miss.

"If FRIDAY scans it, she'll be able to pinpoint exactly where. Is that ok?" He directed his first words in a while at the kid.

Peter's eyes snapped up to his; eyes full of anger and hurt. "Oh, you're asking permission now?"

Tony stepped back from the anger directed at him and fought back his instinct to chew him out; to tell him that he'd had to go behind his back because he was too stubborn to ask for help. But Tony just nodded. The kid grunted, but followed it with a short nod.

Tony picked up a handheld scanner and held it over Peter's arm. "FRIDAY?"

"On it, Boss." A moment later a hologram popped up to the side of Tony showing Peter's arm and indicating where some shards were.

"You're better with the delicate stuff than me," Clint moved out of the way and placed Peter's hand into his before either one of them could object. Tony held it loosely, afraid to spook him again, and pulled a wheelie stool out so he could do this properly.

Peter stayed still as Tony began to tweezer out a few of the smaller pieces of glass. Peter gasped as a piece Tony was trying to extricate got caught on something.

Clint jumped forward. "Let's get you something for the pain."

"It's fine," Peter said quietly.

"Clint's right, it might be a good idea. I synthesised some more of the super soldier painkillers we had from Cap, you shouldn't burn through them." Tony added.

"I said I'm fine." Peter snapped with venom.

So the anger was definitely just focused on him. Good to know.

The room settled to quiet again, with the only sound being the clink of small pieces of glass into the metal tray. The parallels to the last time he had treated one of Peter's wounds came to mind. Had it really only been a few weeks ago that they were patching him up at the farm? The circumstances couldn't be much more different and he was certain he'd take the kid being shot by an arrow again, over this whole shit show.

Clint broke the silence a few moments later. “Since you’re here, you mind if I check out your other injuries?”

Peter hesitated but sighed. “OK,” he murmured.

Clint went behind him and checked out the marks on his back. They were mostly raised red welts with bruising smattered in-between. There were sharp red cuts in a few places. Clint touched them gently and Peter hissed.

“Sorry,” Clint said, “buckle?”

Peter tensed, but then nodded again; his eyes not leaving the floor.

“I’m going to put some antiseptic cream on the cuts, ok?”

Peter barely nodded again. A few moments later Tony felt Peter’s body tense as Clint rubbed the cooling lotion on his back. Clint came around to his front and scanned down his bruises. He reached out and gently pressed the darkened purple bruised side.

Peter almost leapt out of his seat with a whimper.

“Jesus Christ, Barton!” Tony snapped, tweezers still in hand. “I’m trying to do something delicate. He has a cracked rib!”

“What? I didn’t know. Shit, sorry Pete.”

“It’s ok.”

“It’s really not,” muttered Tony, under his breath.

Peter scowled at him. Tony rolled his eyes – stupid super hearing.

“FRIDAY, pull up the scan from earlier.”

It popped up in front of the three of them.

“It looks like it’s started to heal, just not done yet.” Tony flicked through the images, zooming in on an area. “There is another one just healed here. When is that from?”

“I don’t know.”

Tony felt the blood drain from his face. “How many times has he broken your ribs?”

“My healing factor isn’t working right. It can be temperamental.” Tony was pretty sure that Clint noticed he avoided the question.

“Oh?” Clint sounded surprised. “I figured that was something that just worked on its own.”

Tony answered for him. “I’m betting it reacts to adequate sleep, food and low stress. Which I’m guessing have been in short supply?”

Peter nodded gently.

“Has it been going on since you got back?” Tony asked the question more for himself than for Peter. *Had it been going on for almost half a year and he hadn’t noticed it?*

Peter shook his head. “Just a month or so.”

So that meant at least two months.

“Are you almost done?” The kid caught Tony’s eyes for a second; he looked so vulnerable, like he might just shatter like the glass. It was all Tony can do to stop himself from leaping up and hugging him tightly.

Tony went back to the hand, but took his time. He didn't want Peter to try and bolt again before they could calm him down and – and what? – make a plan, call May, have that hug he'd imagined happening.

“Let me see your neck?” Clint moved forward and Peter let him lift his chin up to get a better look at the mark on his throat. “How'd you get this?”

“The belt caught around my neck when I tried to get out the way.”

“That must have hurt like a bitch.”

Peter grunted. “It shut me up for a bit, that's for sure.”

Tony's stomach flipped over. He hated hearing Peter make a joke about it; about a belt buckle to the throat. He shouldn't be joking about that. He shouldn't be able to have that experience to joke about.

Clint leant back against the counter: Tony envied his ability to project calm in this situation. “It's not the first time – the belt?”

Peter shook his head, looking back at the floor.

“My Dad liked to alternate between belt and broom.”

Peter's head snapped up, eyes searching Clint's face.

“He was a mean drunk,” Clint said with a shrug, as if that explained it.

“Mine preferred a backhand across the face,” Tony blurted out. Though he was vocal at times about his feelings towards his Dad, he rarely spoke about the periodic violence; only Rhodey and Pepper knew. As much as it pained him to think of it, he didn't want Peter to think he was alone. He wanted him to know that he understood – at least some of it.

Peter's face showed surprise and he turned then to Tony. Peter studied at him for a moment. What was he looking for? Sincerity? His gaze then went to the wall, where he stared in silence for a few moments. Tony didn't know if he was going to share, or if he assumed what they'd seen told a story enough.

"Well, I guess I'm lucky then..."

Both of the men startled at this statement.

"Lucky?" Clint let out in a breath: suddenly not sounding so composed.

"He's not my Dad and I-I don't have to love him, or whatever, after. I can hate him, free and clear."

Tony didn't know what to say about that and it looked like Clint felt the same. It was at once both a wise and deeply sad statement, which left Tony with an even deeper pit in his stomach. Tony had spent a lifetime with conflicted feelings about his Dad; someone he'd both feared and desperately wanted to impress.

Tony finished putting plasters on the cuts, which were luckily superficial, and Peter pulled back his hand and flexed it.

"Thanks," he said standing up, but making no eye contact with Tony.

"Woah, where you going, buddy?" Clint asked.

"Can't thermoregulate, remember?" They watched as Peter picked up his clothes.

"They are covered in blood. Let me get you something else," Tony said. Peter looked about to protest but as he unfurled his t-shirt and saw the stains, he could obviously see that Tony was right.

"Let's go back upstairs. The pizza had just arrived before your...accident...." Clint suggested.

Peter's stomach let out a loud growl, enough for Tony to hear, and let out what seemed to be a reluctant nod. Tony felt relief flood him as he followed them up to the kitchen area. Peter seemed calmer now; less angry at least.

Clint sorted out reheating the now-cold pizza, while Tony went off to get some clothes for Peter. He came back with a pair of joggers, an Iron Man t-shirt and a worn MIT hoodie.

"Iron man, really?" Peter said and Tony's heart lifted a little when he saw the words were accompanied by half a smile.

Tony grinned back at him. "You know you love it really."

No sooner had Peter pulled the clothes on, Clint was placing a fully loaded plate of pizza in front of him. The two men sat on the stools either side of him, picking at their own food.

Tony thought about what he now knew. Kevin was abusing Peter. It had been going on for 1-2 months, he had broken his bones and beaten him with a belt on more than one occasion. The recap only put him more off the food and he let the half eaten slice of pizza in his hand land back on the plate. Peter was obviously not happy about them discovering his secret. He didn't seem relieved at all. Why? Was it embarrassment?

Clint raised his eyes at Tony and Tony shot back a look that he hoped said '*I have no idea where to go with this.*' Clint simply looked glumly back at him.

All the while through their silent conversation, Peter kept his head down, intent on his food. He powered through the lot and pushed the plate away when he'd finished; a satisfied sigh just audible.

"Thanks for dinner," Peter said quietly.

"You're welcome," said Clint. "No-one was going to eat that pineapple one but you."

"Hey, I paid for it, I should at least get some of the thanks," Tony said, joining in the lightened mood that Clint was going for.

Clint winked at him as Peter took a look at the clock.

“Well, thanks. Do you want me to go clean up the mess in the lab?”

Tony thought about the glass and blood that must cover the floor. “And take DUM-E’s job? He wouldn’t be happy about that.”

“Ok then. Sorry about...that.” Peter said, not looking at him but tapping his finger repeatedly on the countertop.

“You don’t need to apologise.” Tony’s throat felt full as he spoke. There was nothing about this whole situation that the kid should feel like he should apologise for.

“I better get going or May will worry.” Peter slid himself off the stool in a smooth motion.

Tony was in front of him, his heart pounding, before he could go more than a few steps.

“Woah, woah, hold it there, hot shot. What do you think you’re doing?” Tony felt panic closing his throat.

“I’m going home, Tony.” Peter’s voice was low and almost sarcastic.

“So, hang on, you thought that we’d just patch you up and pretend like nothing happened? Send you back home with your broken rib, ripped up back and bruised trachea?”

“Jesus, I feel fine. I’ve eaten now, I’ll get some sleep tonight and then it’ll all be gone by tomorrow.”

Tony rubbed his hand down his face. “Barton, help me out here. I think he actually thinks he means what he says.”

Clint had come to stand off to the side, leaning against the sofa, but didn’t say anything.

“You can’t go back there.” Tony’s voice was taut.

“It’s fine, I can handle it. Besides May is home tonight, nothing will happen.”

Tony groaned; louder this time.

“I think what Tony is trying to say is that you shouldn’t have to. This guy shouldn’t get away with hurting you. You could stop him...”

“I know.” The kid’s voice was emotionless.

“Why then?” Clint pushed.

“I have my reasons.”

Tony was ready to throttle the kid himself for all this avoidance.

“We can go and talk to him for you.” Clint stood up taller, a darkness flashing over his face.

Me first.

Peter’s hand went up. “No. Neither of you.” Peter pointed directly at Tony then, to make sure he understood he included him in that. “You think I couldn’t hurt him if I wanted to? But I don’t. For May’s sake.”

Tony couldn’t let that ride. “If May knew –“

Peter cut him off sharply. “No. I don’t want her to know. It’s...complicated.”

“Pete...”

“Look, you trusted me enough to make me an Avenger. Respect that I’m making a choice in this.”

A choice? To get beaten up? That made no sense. The kid was in deep denial or confused or some combination of the two.

“If you are making these kinds of decisions, then I really was wrong bringing you into everything in the first place.”

The hurt on Peter’s face was evident. “So, I’m a kid when you want to boss me around, but a colleague when you need me.”

Tony tried not to shout. “There is some grey area in the middle here. Look, none of this is about the Avengers. It’s about you, Peter. Bottom line, you aren’t getting hurt on my watch.”

Peter screwed his eyes together and Tony could see that he was tight with frustration.

Clint spoke after a moment. “Look, we are obviously not understanding; this is about May and Alfie? You think he will hurt them, if he’s not hurting you?”

Tony watched Peter’s tensed body unfurl slightly.

“I don’t know. I don’t think so. I haven’t seen any sign of that. It’s me he doesn’t like. I’ve elbowed my way into his family, haven’t I? I mean, I don’t think he would hurt them but still...he can take his anger out on me - I can handle it – I’ve got super healing.”

“You ever fight him back?” Clint asked.

“I don’t want him to figure out I’m Spider-man. And I don’t exactly look like a match for his size, do I?”

“Peter, I get that you have this whole self-sacrificing thing going on, but this is too much,” Tony

said, aware of a pleading in his voice.

“I get hurt on patrol all the time. What’s the difference?”

“What’s the difference?” Tony was exasperated. “The difference is that your home is meant to be where you feel safe; where you can relax. Not somewhere where someone makes your life hell. I can’t imagine he is telling you nice things about yourself whilst he is breaking your bones.”

“It’s not usually this bad. Besides, I get hurt being Spider-man, worse than this even, and you don’t care.” Peter spat out.

“That’s not true. I worry, a lot.”

“Well, you don’t have to. I’m not your... responsibility.”

Tony’s heart fell a bit. *His son.* That’s what he was going to say. Yet that was how he felt: like this was his son and he wasn’t about to let anyone hurt him.

Peter went to move and something in Tony broke.

“No, no, we are not doing this. You’re not going back and that is final.” Tony stood in front of him, blocking his exit. He reached out to grab his arm but thought better of it and pulled away at the last second.

Peter’s eyebrow raised. “You can’t stop me,” he breathed out; his voice almost a hiss and his fists balled.

The tension in the air was palpable. Clint edged closer, sensing possible danger. He looked between his two teammates, both of their chests rising and falling with quick breaths.

In a blast of speed, Peter leaped up to the ceiling and away again, jumping over the man and barrelling down the hallway to the stairs.

Clint grabbed onto Tony and pulled his arms down before he could summon a suit. “Let him go, Tony.”

Peter

Peter’s phone was blasting in his pocket when he got into the subway car, but he didn’t need to look at it to know who it was. He flicked it to silent and shoved it deep into the trouser pocket.

Tony’s words kept rolling through his head as he tried to calm the crawling feeling in his chest. He’d barely raised his voice to Tony before and now he had screamed at him and deliberately disobeyed him. Despite everything that he had gone through, it wasn’t in his nature to push back like that. He’d just been so – scared.

He knew Tony was right; that the situation was bad and escalating. He hated every minute sharing the same space with Kevin. But the moments with May and Alfie made it worth it. Alfie was his brother for all intents and purposes, despite Kevin’s snide comments to the contrary. And May and Alfie loved Kevin. He was balancing it all - *he was* - and now he felt exposed and like he’d just leapt off a cliff.

Peter wasn’t stupid. He knew that Tony wasn’t just going to drop this. But he couldn’t ruin May’s whole life. He just didn’t know what to do. He put his head back against the window and let a tear slide down his cheek.

Peter stopped running after he was a fair way away from the station. He’d left his bag – and his wallet – so he’d had to jump over the barriers. He’d never done that before, and he felt shame spread through him. Would they let him pay twice tomorrow? Or maybe he’d see if he could pay for someone else’s fare tomorrow?

He was so deep in his own thoughts that he was almost at his building before he noticed them. He looked up to see Tony and Clint leant against one of Tony’s cars.

Peter groaned audibly. He wasn't surprised. Of course they came here. He'd hoped Tony would have at least given it until tomorrow.

"What took you so long?" Tony's hands were in his pockets and his smile was hard. "You were in such a hurry earlier."

Peter stopped himself from saying something unkind but spoke in a tight voice. "I left my stuff at your house – I couldn't exactly swing here. Subway was delayed."

There was a silence between them.

"Can't you just drop this?" Peter asked, hoping it was worth a shot.

Tony shook his head in disbelief and Clint just looked off to the side. He tried again.

"This isn't a Spider-man problem, it's a Peter Parker problem, so that is on me. You don't need to get involved."

"Well, now that I know, a Peter problem is a Tony problem, you get that?"

"If I'd *wanted* you to know, I would have told you." Peter heard the coldness in his voice, saw Tony's slight flinch, but he didn't care. Tony was screwing it all up.

There was a pause and Peter saw Tony inhale deeply.

"So, how do you want to do this? You want to tell May? Or call the Police?" Tony was relentless.

"No Police." Peter pushed out. "He's NYPD."

"FRIDAY took pictures."

“Of course she did,” Peter ground his teeth. “Even with evidence, if they start looking, then they might notice my healing and then...”

Tony rolled his eyes. “Ugh already with the stupid secret identity. Fine, so no Police. At least not for now.”

Peter nodded.

“Do you want me to come with you now when you tell her?”

Peter wrapped his arms around himself as he felt his frustration start to rear again. “Stop pressuring me. I-I just need some time to think about the right way, ok? Pick a time when it’s just the two of us. Alfie can’t know. May...she hasn’t been well with this pregnancy...”

“I don’t want you another night in that house if that prick is there.” Tony’s voice came out hoarse.

“Tony, please, after everything May and I have gone through...it’s important that I talk to her one on one. I’ll be ok...please just give me a little time.” Peter tried to contain the tears that wanted to prick his eyes. After everything he’d put up with the last few months, he wasn’t going to be above begging if it meant protecting May.

Peter watched as Tony turned to Clint. They seemed to be having a silent conversation with their eyebrows. Clint must have calmed him down on the ride over here because he turned back and said, carefully, “Okay, and what about the douchebag tonight?”

“Like I said, he doesn’t come after me when May is home.”

Tony crossed his arms, unsatisfied.

Peter sighed. “Fine, I’ll lock my door AND stick a chair under the handle.”

“And this is only happening if you promise to answer all my messages tonight.”

“Jesus, Tony.” Peter closed his eyes for a second.

“Well, in that case I’ll just go straight in now....”

“Okay, okay, yes.”

“And you answer me when I call you.”

“Yes, okay.”

“And if he even looks like he might try to lay a hand on you, you get out of there, using your powers, if you have to, and you call me.”

Peter hesitated but nodded. He would agree to anything not to have Tony barge upstairs and tell May right now.

“Promise?”

“Oh Jesus, yes. Anything else, or are you happy now?” he snapped.

Tony’s face fell. “Nothing about this situation makes me happy, kid. You get that, right?”

Peter felt a shudder go down his arms and he looked away giving a slight nod.

“I guess I better head in before May gets worried.” The irony about there being more danger inside than out was not lost on him.

Clint came forward then, having previously opted to keep quiet.

“We know this is not easy, Pete.” He put his hand gently on Peter’s shoulder and squeezed it.
“Just remember that you helped defeat Thanos, you’ll get through all this.”

“You do remember that I didn’t get out alive the first time, right?” Peter blurted out.

Clint chuckled, but Tony’s eyes looked like they were going to pop. “I can’t think about the many layers of that statement.”

“Night then.” Peter started to walk towards the building.

“What? No hug for me?”

Peter turned around but kept walking backwards, narrowing his eyes as he looked at Tony.

“Goodnight, Mr Stark.”

Peter took a deep breath, zipping the hoodie up around his bruised neck, and shoving his injured hand into the pocket, before he knocked on the door.

It swung open to reveal Kevin with an apron round his waist. He gave Peter a cold look. “You’re late.”

Before Peter could speak, May came up behind him.

“Peter!” She pulled the door open wider and pulled him inside with a hug. “Why are you knocking?”

Peter bunched up the hoodie around his neck. “I left my keys– oh, and well, my bag – at Mr Stark’s. I’ll have to get it tomorrow.”

“You missed dinner,” said Kevin.

“Oh yes, do you need to eat sweetie?” Aunt May’s arm swept towards the kitchen expectantly.

“Even if I did, I wouldn’t risk eating anything made by you.” It was an old, familiar joke – May’s bad cooking skills – but it made Kevin’s mouth set into a straight line. Peter was rewarded with a tinkling laugh from May.

“Are you sure?” Peter watched as May grabbed Kevin’s hand and started to pull him to the sofa area.

“It’s ok, Tony fed me.”

“What foie gras and caviar?” Kevin said, with a smirk. He had a real stick in his ass about Tony’s wealth. May batted him on the chest chidingly.

“Pizza, actually,” Peter smiled tightly, feeling somehow like he had one upped him.

“Where’s Alfie?” Peter could do with some uncomplicated kid hugs right now.

“He’s in bed so no waking him. Like I said, you’re late.”

May smacked him again. “Kevin is right though. He has been a full-on ball of energy today and I’m not sure I can take anymore. This pregnancy is kicking my butt.”

Peter could see how tired she looked; the fine lines around her eyes more noticeable.

“Come here baby,” Kevin pulled her feet up onto his lap and started to rub her feet and she let out an audible sigh. *My cue to leave.*

May's head arched over the sofa. "Want to watch a movie with us, sweetie?"

Right now, he wanted nothing more than to snuggle into her side like he used to; watching bad TV and eating buckets of popcorn. Her presence making him feel that whatever else was going on, that he'd be okay.

Kevin's look distinctly told him he wasn't welcome.

"That's cool. I have to catch up on my homework and then get to bed early. I'm pretty beat."

"Good idea sweetheart, you do look a little pale."

After a visit to the bathroom, Peter shuffled into the kitchen and grabbed a drink and some fruit to take with him. A little screw you to Kevin, as he wouldn't call him out on eating when May was around. As he came back out to the hallway, May was now curled up next to Kevin and he was nuzzling her hair, placing light kisses on her forehead, as she laughed at the screen. The sound made his heart ache a little as he thought about pulling the rug out from under her – from the life she built for herself when he wasn't there. She so deserved to be happy.

He quickly got in his room, locking the door quietly and stifling the tears that welled up in his eyes. This was not how he had expected the day to go. Tony *knew*. He knew. And he was going to make him tell May. A muffled laugh came through the door. God, what was he going to do?

His phone beeped then.

TS : How is it going?

PP : Peachy.

TS : I need non-sarcastic answers.

TS: Are you safe?

Peter pulled his desk chair over and propped it under the door handle – he took a photo with his phone. In the short time that had taken, Tony had already messaged him three more times.

TS: Peter?

TS : We had a deal.

TS : Should I come over?

PP : Keep what's left of your hair on.

Peter sent the photo.

PP : There you go. Fire hazard level of safety. Happy?

TS : Not remotely.

TS : You do have a window that opens in your room? If there was a fire, I mean.

PP : I'm going to bed now.

TS : You should eat something first. I know you're still hungry.

Peter snapped a picture of the drink and fruit he had brought in for himself before laying down on the bed.

PP : Despite what you think, I can take care of myself.

There was a pause and the three dots stayed hovering in the air for a few minutes.

TS : I just wish you took as good a care of yourself, as you do everyone else.

TS : Night kiddo.

Peter's throat tightened up and he let the tears flow.

Tony

“Well, aren't you looking like a sad cliché?”

Tony looked up from his workbench where he was distinctly not working and just sniffing scotch while watching DUM-E making a hash of cleaning up the glass and Peter's blood.

Clint pulled himself away from where he'd draped himself in the doorway and came over.

“How many of these have you had?” He picked up the bottle and sniffed it, the smell offending him, judging by the look on his face.

“None, I've just been...” Tony indicated swirling. “I want to stay sharp in case the kid calls.”

Clint looked slightly impressed by that. “You've levelled up to teenager Dad skills quickly.”

“Oh yeah, I'm doing stellar as the substitute Dad today.” His eyes looked over to the mess that DUM-E was just moving around in circles.

“Yeah, how exactly did he end up more maimed here than when he showed up?”

Tony closed his eyes for a beat. “It was going well, I kept it light; he was getting relaxed. Then his phone rang, and that prick was shouting at him – I could hear it from here. It was like a light shut off in him. I asked him about the guy but other than saying he didn’t like him much, he wasn’t giving anything away. I managed to get him into the suit and FRIDAY scanned him and told me what you saw and I fully freaked. I needed to see it with my own eyes, so I retracted the suit...”

“You did what?” Clint looked amazed. “Tony!”

“Like I said, I fully freaked. Wait no, that came after I asked him about the fact his body looked like he’d been bulldozed and he lied – *twice* - and said he had been on patrol – even though I’d checked and I knew he hadn’t. So, I decided to be direct and told him we needed to talk about Kevin and that was when he crushed the glass.”

“Shit.”

“And then the rest you know...”. Tony motioned lazily with his hand.

“I...”

“You can say it. I fucked this one right up.” Tony contemplated actually drinking the scotch.

“I wouldn’t say that. This whole situation is messed up.” Clint let out a sigh.

Tony swirled the liquid again: letting it slosh inside the glass. “I’m not sure we made the right call letting him go back there.”

Clint let out a sigh. “I know.”

“He was just so adamant that he needed to tell May by himself.” Tony put the glass down. “But he is still just 16. Still a kid. I wouldn’t have let Morgan go back.”

A spurt of guilt ran through him. If he wouldn't let Morgan do that, then he shouldn't have let Peter, right?

"I had the same thought about my kids. But he isn't them. He's a different kid. He's Spider-man."

"That doesn't seem to have helped up until now," Tony said grimly.

"What I mean is that he has been through a lot in his life. Letting him have a bit of control in this, when he hasn't before, certainly not lately...I dunno, I think it's important."

Tony hummed. He didn't know what was the right thing to do.

Clint switched his weight. "Well, if it was one of my kids, I probably would've paid this guy a visit myself."

"That thought has crossed my mind. About every second," Tony said, spinning the wrench in his hand. "Maybe we should."

"Peter didn't seem like that was why he wanted," Clint said.

"I'm not sure what he wants matters anymore." Tony sighed. "I still don't get it though. Why he wouldn't let us or just do it himself?"

"You ever hit your old man back?"

Clint's question threw him for a second. "No, I never did."

"You know why?"

"Well, my Mom would've been —" A penny dropped. "Oh, right. He doesn't want to upset May."

“Like I said, he’s all about protecting people. And I think maybe the thing with May, it goes deeper...she is his only living relative after all.”

Tony inhaled. It would make sense that he’d be worried about her wellbeing. That she was all he had, and vice versa – well, not vice versa anymore. Tony hoped that now – after everything – that the kid knew how much he meant to him. That he loved him. But Tony also knew he wasn’t good at that stuff.

Tony threw his head back.

“I’m going to have to talk to him again, aren’t I? Like about feelings. You know I’m not cut out for that.”

Clint let out a short bark of a laugh. “You’ll be fine. I’m meant to be heading home tomorrow but I’m sure if I tell Laura I need to stay on, it won’t be a problem.”

“It’s fine. Pepper is back with Morgan tomorrow. I’ll pick Peter up from school again and see if he’ll actually talk to me this time.”

“Are you sure? I was a little worried earlier that you two might come to blows.”

The air left Tony’s lungs for a second before kicking back in. “I would never!”

“I meant *him* hitting *you*, Tony.” Tony relaxed as took in Clint’s true meaning; though the thought didn’t exactly settle him. “I’ve never seen that side of Peter before. Angry. Even in battle he is always so cheerful and eager to please. Today he was just...dark.”

Tony nodded – it had been eye-opening to say the least. “I guess he felt cornered. Well done Tony Stark, you’ve turned the nicest kid in the world into an angry rebel already.”

“Ugh,” Tony rubbed his temple and opened his eyes when he felt Clint’s hand on his shoulder. “And did you hear him tonight? ‘*Goodnight Mr Stark*’. He hasn’t called me that for ages...he knew exactly what he was saying. Stab me in the heart why don’t you...”

Clint smiled tightly. “I’m going to leave you to ruminate on that one – I’ll be off early in the

morning, but I'll be contactable."

Tony nodded.

"Clint," Tony called him as he neared the door. "Thanks."

"No problem. Look after that heart, Tin Man."

Chapter End Notes

I was really nervous to post this chapter as I was acutely aware from the comments on the last chapter that it does not fulfill what most people were expecting.

I am fully expecting shouting in the comments?!

All thoughts welcome!

In regards to updating, I know I've been spoiling you (!) updating for like 6 days in a row I think at one point. But for the next few weeks it will be likely to be every other day on average, due to life commitments. Obvs if its ready, I will put it up. I'm not a meany...except to poor Peter of course.

Thank you all again for the support 😊

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Peter

Peter gasped as he opened his eyes, his hand gripping into the sweaty sheets. His heart was pounding so hard it felt like it'd expanded into his throat.

Just a dream, just a dream.

Peter pulled himself up to sitting, feeling moisture seeping through his t-shirt.

It was the Vulture on top of him, except this time it wasn't green eyes piercing through a mask that he could see, but Kevin's angry stare and emotionless voice. 'Why couldn't you just stay dead?'

Peter suppressed a shudder. The apartment was quiet around him now; the only movement coming from the pulse in his head. He reached for his phone; 5.13am. Great. After catching up on some homework online and stewing about everything that had happened that day, he hadn't turned off his light until gone 1am. Today was going to be a monumental slog.

Once he made his way to the bathroom, he peeled the plasters off of his fingers, pleased to see that the cuts from last night had healed and then let himself indulge in a long shower when no one else was up. As he towelled himself off, he could see in the mirror that the mark around his neck had simmered to barely a whisper of yellow and green. It would probably only be noticeable in bright light, and was low enough on the neck that if he wore Tony's big hoodie he would be able to forego the turtleneck. That was good, as there were surely only so many jokes about being a beatnik that MJ could fathom up. The bruise on his side was still obvious but when he breathed in it didn't hurt much at all. He turned his back to the mirror now and craned his head. The cuts were still vivid but the bruises lighter. That was some magic pizza.

He dressed quickly and pulled back on Tony's hoodie, noticing it held the familiar, comforting smell of him. Shit, why had he shouted at him like that? He was just trying to help. But he didn't get that Peter wasn't just a little kid, he could handle this: make it work for May and Alfie.

There was a knock on the door followed by a little voice: “Petey, I have to pee...now!”

Peter unlocked the door and a bundle of tight blond curls barrelled past him.

“Morning to you too, Alfie.”

He closed the door and let him pee in peace. The door opened a moment later.

“Can you make me breakfast?” The kid was the most food orientated person he’d ever met.

“Wash your hands first, dude.”

The little kid groaned but went back in as told, coming back far too quickly with what Peter suspected were just hands splashed with some water.

Alfie put his arms up and Peter scooped him up, shifting him to one side.

“What’s it going to be this morning then?”

“Peter Eggs!”

Peter smiled at him. “Coming up, little one.”

He put Alfie down in the chair at the table and got to work on what was really just scrambled eggs. He made a show of covering the bowl behind him.

“No looking now, you know you can’t know the secret ingredient until you are 16!”

Alfie moaned about it not being fair while Peter turned around and just add some salt and pepper

and a few chives before cooking it up.

He filled both their plates, grabbed two forks and sat down next to Alfie. Neither spoke until they had eaten everything on their plates – something they had in common.

May came in then, looking tired and dishevelled. Peter tried not to think about the conversation he was meant to have with her soon as she came up behind them and placed a kiss on each of their heads.

“You want some eggs?” Peter went to get up, but she put her hand on his shoulder.

“I don’t think I could stomach anything. This morning – all day – sickness is really affecting me this time.” Peter frowned: she did look kind of green.

“I can take Alfie to preschool.”

“No, it’s fine, I have a shift and it’s on the way. Thank you though.” She squeezed his shoulder before turning to the sink to get some water.

“Do you have time to play Lego with me?” Alfie looked up eagerly.

Peter checked his phone. He had a little time before he had to get to school.

“Let’s get you dressed for Pre-K first though.”

May mouthed a thank you to him as he gathered up the small boy.

Peter had wrestled the kid into some weird outfit of his choice, and they’d got the Lego out when his phone vibrated with a video call.

He declined it and sent a quick text:

PP : Busy rn. Talk later.

TS : Remember the deal?

A few seconds later the video call began again but Peter couldn't stop it coming through this time. Tony's face filled the screen, his brow furrowed deeply.

"I don't think you understand how much I dislike having my calls declined."

Peter rolled his eyes.

"You know that I can see you, right?"

"I sure do."

"So much sass, so early," muttered Tony as he rubbed the deep marks under his eyes.

"Not had your usual gallon of coffee yet?" Peter's voice wavered, wondering if Tony's tiredness was related to him.

"Only a half-gallon so far..."

"Mr Tony, is that you?" Alfie interrupted. He'd taken a liking to Tony: if Kevin knew he would not be pleased. "Do you have your funny glasses on?"

Alfie squeezed himself onto Peter's lap so he could see the screen.

Tony let out a small laugh. "Not today, young Alfred. And what are you up to this morning?"

"Petey made me eggs and now we are playing Lego, see?" Alfie held up what was starting to look like a house.

“That looks like it would withstand even Thor’s lightning.”

Alfie’s eyes went wide. “Do you think?!”

“Sure do.”

“Can I see Morgan?” Alfie put his face really close to the screen, so all Tony was seeing was a close up of his nose.

“She isn’t here right now buddy. Off visiting Gerald. She’ll be back in New York by lunchtime. You mind if I talk to Peter for a minute?”

Alfie shrugged and took off to the other corner of the room to dig deeper in the big Lego box.

Peter got up and went to the other side of the room, yawning as he did.

“Right, do me a favour and move your camera away a bit,” Peter did as Tony said. “More, more, right now turn your head to the side...”

Peter realised what he was trying to do.

“I’m fine, Tony.” He pulled the hoodie down and showed the receding mark on his neck.

“Almost gone. Nothing new.”

Tony let out a breath. “Ok good. Right, you’re coming to the Tower after school.”

“I can’t. I have homework and I have to pick up Alfie today.”

“Perfect, Happy will pick you up and bring you both here. He can have a playdate with Morgan, and I’ll help you with your homework. I’m a genius after all.”

Alfie's ears picked up his name. "A playdate with Morgan – yessss!"

"I'll have to ask May," Peter sighed, resigned to the fact that Tony wasn't going to be subtle with his hovering.

"Already messaged her." There was a ding. "She says yes, but home by 7.30pm."

"Great, I guess I don't have a choice," Peter responded, through gritted teeth.

"No, you don't. Later kid." Tony signed off before Peter could protest further.

—

Alfie chattered the entire way from school to the Tower. Peter couldn't help feeling a little jealous that Happy didn't seem to mind when it was Alfie talking non-stop: answering all of his questions with a smile that belied his usual grumpy state.

Alfie was almost bouncing off the walls of the elevator as it rose to the penthouse.

"Welcome Alfie and Peter, Boss and Miss Morgan are waiting for you in the lounge."

"So cool!" exclaimed Alfie.

"Calm down buddy." Peter squeezed his hand as the little boy jumped up and down, not hearing him.

The doors opened and Alfie pulled Peter's hand to go faster, not understanding why Peter was not as excited about this visit as he was.

Peter wasn't used to this dragging feeling in his stomach when he was at the Tower. It was normally one of his favourite places to be – a home from home. He paused to look down the hallway; his eyes narrowing in on the spot where he'd been up against the wall last night. All traces of his blood were cleaned away from where he had no doubt smeared it during his freak out.

They reached the lounge. Peter stifled a laugh seeing Tony asleep on the sofa: a stuffed giraffe under his arm. Morgan was colouring something in at the table. It was a far cry from the Iron Man that he knew – what to him was only six months ago. He could never have imagined seeing him so domesticated like this, but, like with everything, he excelled at it.

Morgan noticed them first, dropped her crayon and dashed over.

“Peter!” She squealed as she jumped into his arms and he grimaced over her shoulder as she banged into his tender ribs. Not quite as healed as he'd thought. “I missed you.” She planted a kiss on his cheek. He gave her a squeeze back.

“I only saw you on Sunday, but I missed you too.”

He had put her down when Tony had made it over to them, rubbing sleep from his eyes. He gave Peter a tentative but warm smile and then looked down to Alfie, who was suddenly clung to Peter's leg.

“Hey Alfred, how is it going?”

“Ok, Mr Tony.”

Tony ruffled his hair gently.

Morgan still had hold of Peter's hand. “Do you want to come and see my toys, Alfie?”

Alfie's grip on Peter tightened: his enthusiasm at being here having seamlessly been exchanged for fear.

“Why don’t you show Peter and Alfie your playroom while I get snacks?”

This seemed to satisfy Alfie and he followed along, so long as he had Peter’s hand.

When Tony came back in ten minutes later with a tray of juice and snacks, Peter was laying on the floor covered in bean bags and cushions and was being jumped on by the little kids.

“Go easy, you might break your brother.”

Peter tensed at the slip, but neither of the kids corrected Tony.

“Well, you won’t be able to eat these delicious snacks unless you come over here.”

The kids swarmed to the tray, picking up the cookies before the fruit, as standard.

“Alfie, do you like Lego?” Morgan asked, bits of cookie flying out of her mouth as she did.

Alfie grinned a delighted, chocolatey grin in return and followed behind Morgan as she pulled out a massive box of pieces.

“Oh wow, Petey, they have more than we do!” He looked in awe. “What shall we build?”

“Ooh ooh, let’s build a really big tower!” Morgan said, stretching her hand up towards the ceiling.

“Yeah, like this one.”

“Yeah!”

Peter went to go with them, but Tony put his hand out.

“I’m gonna borrow Peter for a bit, he needs some help with his homework.” Tony sent him a wink.

Alfie and Morgan barely mumbled an acknowledgement as they started moving pieces around.

“FRIDAY, let me know if Alfie or Morgan leave this room.” Tony instructed and nodding when the AI confirmed this with a flash of lights.

“Let’s go in the kitchen. I need coffee.”

Peter followed him, picking up his bag as he did: not looking forward to the topic of conversation that was sure to follow.

“Good day at school?” Tony ventured.

Peter fought the urge to roll his eyes. Tony was obviously easing him into harder conversations by starting with the mundane. That said, he couldn’t remember much of the day; he’d been too caught up thinking about last night and what telling May might look like.

Peter led with a shrug. “Fine.”

Tony turned back around from where he had been fiddling with the coffee machine and his face turned into a wide grin.

“Oh kid, the hero worship is getting a bit much.”

Tony pointed down to the battered Iron Man bag Peter had put up on the counter. Peter felt his cheeks start to heat.

“I left my usual bag here, so I had to borrow one of Alfie’s.”

Tony suppressed a laugh. “Oh man, did the bullies have a field day? I mean you might as well have had a picture of Jesus on your bag.”

Peter gave him a look. “Jesus, really?”

“Literal saviour of the world over here.” Tony grinned and threw some blueberries into his mouth.

“You’re still dining out on that? Yawnsville. Don’t worry about school, they just thought I was being ironic.” Peter grinned back.

Tony laughed and Peter felt his heart warm at their usual banter; like their relationship would be ok. It was like yesterday hadn’t happened and nothing had changed. If nothing had to change, then maybe everything would be alright.

“Right come on, get your stuff out.” Tony tapped on the table.

“You realise that I don’t actually need any help with my homework.”

“FRIDAY, what did my hack of Midtown’s records tell me about Mr Parker’s grades for the last quarter?”

“Peter is doing well in all his classes, with the exception of Spanish in which he has a B. However, his overall GPA is down a few points in the last few weeks and his teachers have discussed this with him.”

Tony raised an eyebrow at him.

“It’s not that I can’t do it. I handed in a few assignments late. I have just been...”

Staying out as much as possible so that I don’t have to be at home with a psycho.

“...preoccupied.”

Tony gave a knowing nod and pulled up the stool next to him, his shoulder keeping a gentle

pressure against Peter's.

“¿Comenzamos con el español?”

—

By the time FRIDAY piped up that Pepper was coming up in the elevator, they had moved on to computer science which, with Tony there, even Peter had to admit, he was learning a lot.

Of course, Peter heard the doors open before Tony and he turned to see Pepper carrying a large bag of takeout as well as her briefcase. He jogged over to help her and she happily handed him the warm bag of food.

“Thank you sweetheart,” Pepper said as he set the bag on the counter. She gave him a warm smile before enveloping him in a longer than normal hug. He caught her gaze falter just slightly as she pulled back.

She knew.

Peter felt his stomach flip over and his heart rate increase.

Everyone is going to know how weak I am.

Pepper moved over to give Tony a kiss on the cheek.

“Start serving it up? I’ll get the kids.”

Peter waited until Pepper was out of range before he turned to Tony, who’d stood to start sorting the food.

“You-you told her?” It was less of a question than a statement and laced with enough venom to

widen Tony's eyes.

"Yes, I did." Tony turned his body to face Peter.

"You had no right." Peter's hands balled into fists around the sleeves of Tony's hoodie. "That is my...my personal business."

"I don't keep secrets from her. She cares about you a lot, you know."

"I..I..." Peter couldn't get his thoughts into words. "It's bad enough that you know, that Clint knows...I don't need any more people knowing that I'm...I'm..."

Weak. A loser.

The words died in his mouth as Alfie and Morgan came pelting down the hallway, followed by Pepper.

"Cheeseburgers!" Morgan squealed having already made her way up and into the bag, ignoring her father who was still stood looking carefully at Peter.

Peter willed himself to sit back at the counter, pushing his nails into his skin to try to quiet himself.

"Here you go Peter, your favourite." Pepper put a larger burger and fries in front of him.

"Thanks," he replied, pushing the words out but not looking up at Pepper.

He kept his eyes on his food for the second night in a row as two adults had a silent, mouthed conversation next to him. The constant chatter from the kids was welcome white noise as he tried to calm the crawling feeling inside of him.

He finished his burger and threw the scrunched-up wrapping into the bag.

“I got extra’s for you,” Pepper said. “I know you get hungry.”

“Yeah, Peter eats more than anyone I know, even Uncle Bruce,” agreed Morgan.

“Thank you, but I’m fine.” Peter said tightly. “Finish up Alfie, we have to get going.”

“We haven’t watched Moana yet,” Alfie exclaimed through a mouthful of fries.

“I did kind of say that they could watch it after dinner,” Pepper said, looking slightly sheepish. “It’s only just after 5...”

Two sets of baby browns looked up at him expectantly; even in a bad mood, he didn’t stand a chance.

“Fine,” he caved.

“I’ll set it up and dig out some popcorn. Why don’t you guys head down to the lab?”

He’d forgotten how smooth Pepper could be. Tony shouldn’t have told her his business. Peter found his rage growing as he trailed behind Tony towards the lab.

—

Tony

Tony held open the door and let the kid walk by him, as sullen as he’d ever seen him. He blew out a breath and tried to gather his reserves for whatever this conversation was going to be.

He watched as Peter went over to the middle of the room and shoved his hands into the pockets of

his old hoodie, fixing his glare to the ground. The way it engulfed him just made him look more like the kid he was.

“Let me guess,” Tony said, walking closer to him, “you really wanted Thai.”

“Is my life a joke to you?” Peter burst out.

Tony unfolded his arms. “No, no, it is not. It’s important to me. I’m worried - it’s not like you to be borderline rude to Pepper.”

Tony watched the boy’s internal struggle before his shoulders slumped.

“I-I’ll go and apologise to Pepper.”

Tony held his hand up before Peter could move more than a few feet towards the door.

“She’ll get over your aggressive chewing, Parker. Just talk to me.”

Tony watched the kid closely, his eyes screwed up like he was trying to contain the world inside himself.

“Please don’t tell anyone else.” His voice was so tight and clipped that Tony felt as if he’d been nicked.

“There is only one more person that needs to know.”

Tony watched as his words seemed to force tears out of the kid’s eyes, which he hurriedly pushed away with his sleeves.

Tony went to reach for him – to finally hold him close - but Peter bundled himself even more into the hoodie and away from his arms. It was strange how much he craved touch now after an adulthood of rarely being the one to initiate it. When Peter pulled away, it played a familiar twang from childhood – of wanting comfort but not getting it.

“Is that why you made me come here today? To put more pressure on me?” The kid sounded so miserable; it was torture.

Tony sighed. “I’m not trying to pressurise you kid.”

“Then don’t. Just leave it all alone.”

“You know I can’t do that...”

“Why not? I had...had a plan and you’re going to ruin it.”

Tony let out a breath. At least Peter was talking today; he’d better encourage it. “And what was this plan then?”

“If I work really hard, maybe I can get early acceptance to college nearby and then I will be out of there in like a year, a year and a half.”

“That’s your plan?” Tony hoped his look fully conveyed his incredulity. “Let yourself get the shit kicked out of you for 18 months?”

“I can handle it...”

“Oh my God, has this guy done a number on your head too?” Tony’s fist curled. “Is this one of your twisted responsibility things? You think...you think you deserve it?”

Peter’s face flashed with something that looked too close to a yes for Tony to be comfortable. Peter pushed his hair out of his face before he spoke rapidly;

“No, it’s not that. It’s just...May has taken care of me for so long...put her whole life on hold...it’s my turn now. If I tell her, she’s in an awkward position, and if I go to the Police, and they believe me, then we are talking foster care and then how would I be Spider-Man...”

“Hold up. There are so many things to get into in that sentence, but let’s just back it up. You think if you tell May that means YOU have to leave?” Tony stepped closer to him. “Kevin will be the one leaving and looking at jail time...”

“That’s not right.” Peter’s brow wrinkled. “They are her real family; they need to stay together.”

Tony’s heart skipped a beat. “*Her real family?* What the hell are you talking about, Peter? You’re her real family.”

“I’m not a kid, so don’t play dumb. You know there’s a difference.” Peter’s face was dead serious.

“So, you feel that May is not your family because she isn’t blood?”

“Well, no...”

“Then you’ve killed that argument by your own logic straight away.” Tony threw his arms up in exasperation.

Peter’s voice was choked as he spoke. “I can’t be the one to take her husband away again and I-I can’t be the reason that Alfie grows up without a Dad, ok? I know what that’s like.”

Tony paused as he realised the enormity of emotional baggage the kid was carrying. *Again.* He felt responsible for what happened to Ben in some way? They’d never spoken about what happened to Ben. He filed that away for later.

There was quiet for a few moments as Tony tried to find the words to make Peter realise that he was worth something. That he mattered just as much as Alfie. But he wouldn’t be able to hear it now. He was so rooted in protecting May, he couldn’t see the wood for the trees. Tony decided to try a different tact.

“And what if you’re off at college and he starts on Alfie? Have you considered that?”

“Hence the plan to stay nearby. But if you saw him with Alfie, you’d know, he just wouldn’t.”

Peter stepped closer to the workbench; his eyes cast down at the wrench he was fiddling with. "It's me that's the problem."

"Kid..." Tony leaned against the table - within touching distance of him - and tried to keep his voice steady. "You could never be a problem."

"How do you know? Maybe I'm really hard to live with. I talk back too much..." Peter looked up at him with sad eyes. "You're always saying I'm too sassy."

"I like sassy."

"Yeah, well, he doesn't." Peter scrapped his teeth along his lip. "He doesn't like anything that I do."

The familiarity hit him hard; after all wasn't that just the perfect call back to his own childhood. It didn't matter how much he excelled; eons ahead of his peers, MIT at 14, patents on new tech coming out of his ears before 18, but nothing was ever good enough for Howard Stark.

"Peter, I know what it's like to live with someone who doesn't appreciate you. It's fucking hard. It grates on you every day until you feel...small. It really messes with your mind. I don't want that for you."

I don't want you to become bitter like I did.

Peter's chin wobbled for a second before stopping and then he spoke quietly. "I think it's too late for that."

Tony felt a rush of pure anger; how dare this guy hurt Peter like this. How dare he try to crush this joyful, open hearted, firecracker of a kid.

"Son of a bitch!" Tony slammed his fist onto the table, scattering tools and making Peter jump.

"Shit, sorry Pete." Tony reached for him, but he scuttled backwards again. Tony felt his stomach plummet as he could see Peter trembling. "I'm not gonna...I'm not mad at you, buddy. I'm mad

at him.”

“I- I know...I’m sorry...I’m just on edge. I know y-you won’t...” Peter’s breaths were ragged.

Pepper came in then, her eyes full of blazing worry. The noise had obviously risen over *‘You’re Welcome.’*”

She took in Peter’s hunched form and went straight over to him.

Tony opened his mouth to warn her that he didn’t want to be touched, but stopped when she instantly pulled him into a hug. He felt a pang of envy when Peter didn’t hesitate to return the embrace that he so badly wanted to give.

—

Peter

The car ride back was like a poorly attended evening mass; a few coughs and shuffles every now and then, but otherwise silence. Alfie had fallen asleep, draped across Peter, almost as soon as the car had pulled away. Peter was thankful that Tony hadn’t tried to initiate any conversation as he felt about as fragile as a dandelion in the wind. One puff and he might just disintegrate.

The car pulled up and Peter had his hand on the handle as soon as it came to a stop.

“Pete,” Tony grimaced at the loudness of his voice, but Alfie stayed asleep.

“Tonight, was a bit...intense. But I need to know that we are on the same page now.” Tony looked at him intently. “I can’t allow you to keep having this happen for the next two years. I can’t believe I’ve allowed you to go back in the house for another night...”

“May is home...” Peter interjected.

“Yes, yes, whatever. My point is, we’ve agreed that she needs to know.” Tony’s pointed look that followed seemed to require an answer and Peter gave the slightest of nods. Tony continued. “You know, you don’t have to be the one. I can talk to her for you.”

“No!” Peter’s voice slightly screeched. “Don’t. She will take it better from me. I...I’ll do it. Tomorrow, after school. Kevin’s working. She has an early shift so she’ll have had time to rest before I get in.”

Tony looked relieved. “I know it doesn’t feel like it, but May will appreciate you telling her now. Better off a little pain now, then a lot later on.”

Peter took that in. If she found out later on that he’d been hiding it, she would be devastated. He nodded back at Tony and began to open the door.

“You need help with him?” Tony’s head inclined towards Alfie.

“I’m stronger than I look, remember?” Peter gave him a small smile.

“Yeah, you are.” He heard Tony say gently as he closed the door.

Although Alfie was a dead weight, Peter opted to carry him up to the second-floor apartment to avoid the noise of the lift. He managed to unlock the door one handed and ease the little body back through.

“Peter, is that you?” May’s head popped up from sofa. “Awww,” she cooed, seeing them both.

“Yeah, he conked out on the way back.”

Kevin came from the bedroom then, and a scowl passed over his features as he came towards them.

“You shouldn’t have let him fall asleep.”

“I...it was near enough his bedtime; I didn’t think it would matter.” Kevin’s face told him otherwise.

“Here, I’ll take him.” Kevin came and pulled Alfie gently from his arms, and Peter watched as he pressed soft kisses to Alfie’s head as he took him to his room.

“Come over here sweetie.” May let herself lay back down on the couch.

“I’ve got homework and extracurriculars I have to do...”

“Peter, come, I have an early shift, so I won’t see you otherwise!” Peter could see her arms sticking up, hands making a grabby motion, inviting him for a hug. He came around the sofa and knelt down into her embrace. She smelt like apple shampoo and the faint whiff of disinfectant that always followed her from the hospital. She smelt like the only home he’d ever known.

”Ignore Mr Grumpy Pants, you know what a stickler he is for rules and routine.”

Peter certainly did. He began to pull away but May pulled him right back.

“Oh no you don’t, not yet. I’ve barely seen you the last few weeks. I feel like I need to double down on my Peter hugs every time I see you, in case I don’t get them for a while.”

“You can always have them Aunt May,” he replied, snuggling into her warmth.

Her body tensed then, and he pulled back a little. “What’s wrong?”

Her eyes widened. “I think I can feel the baby moving.”

Peter smiled and looked at her tummy, not seeing any movement. “You can? Already?”

“It is more a fluttering feeling at this stage, another month and it will be more obvious.”

A thought struck her face and she grabbed his hand. “But with your senses, you might be able to feel it...”

He nodded consent and she put his hand on her warm belly. He concentrated for a few moments and then he felt a tiny tremor.

“Was that..?”

May nodded. Peter pressed his hand closer and waited. He could hear May’s heart beating steadily but there was something else. A much faster rhythm. He leant his head down until his ear was touching her tummy too. There it was: a second, distinct heartbeat. Then another tiny movement followed by an increase of the second heartbeat.

“I can hear the heartbeat.” Tears pushed into his eyes at the sound of this little life growing.

May laughed and her eyes glistened too. “You big softy. She is going to have you wrapped around her little finger.”

“She?!” Peter raised his head to meet her eyes.

May smiled broadly. “That’s what they think the scan showed today. But don’t mention it to Alfie until we have had it confirmed.”

A little girl. He pictured Morgan then – all dark hair and brown eyes. A sister. A mom, dad, son and daughter. The perfect family unit. Peter felt this throat tighten. He was going to ruin everything. There was no way he could tell her. No way. He pressed his head down against her stomach again and tried to push the tears away as he focused on the two heartbeats. He felt May run her fingers through his hair in a rhythm and he thought he might just break down there and then.

“What’s going on?” Kevin’s gruff voice came through his senses.

“I thought I felt the baby move, so we were trying to see if we could feel it.”

“It’s far too early,” Kevin snorted before falling into the armchair and pressing the TV on. Not for the first time, Peter fantasised about pushing his head through a wall.

Peter kissed May’s belly gently before sitting up. He met her eyes briefly and she gave him a warm smile.

“I’ve got homework…”

“Don’t stay up too late working on those extracurriculars now,” May called after him as he crossed the room.

“I won’t,” Peter said as he closed the door.

He grabbed his suit and was out of the window as quick as he could make it.

A quick change in the alleyway and he used his web-shooters to start swinging.

“Hello Peter, welcome back.”

The AI’s warm voice wasn’t helping him calm down.

“Hi Karen.”

“Peter, your heart rate is elevated.”

Peter swung but was finding it hard to catch his breath. “Uh huh.”

“Peter your stress hormone levels are reading very high and your breathing is short. I would suggest taking a break.”

Peter just wanted to get away – literally away – right now. His breath was hard to get out and his chest felt funny. A building seemed to suddenly morph another story and Peter blinked just in time to avoid crashing completely into it, and instead skidded across the concrete roof, scuffing his knees in the process and ending up lying on his back, the cold starting to seep through his suit.

“Peter, you are in distress, should I contact Mr Stark?”

“No, no absolutely not.”

Peter pulled off the mask and took in a few gulps of evening air. What was the technique Tony used?

I can feel the concrete, my suit, my face.

I can see the stars, clouds, brick.

I can hear cars, an alarm, a rat in the alley below.

The panic subsided slowly and he sat up again, wiping away the tears tracking down his cheeks. Once he was in control again, he pulled the mask back on.

“Sorry about that, Karen.”

“You have an incoming call from Mr Stark.”

“I told you not to contact him!”

“I didn’t, Peter,” her voice sounded oddly offended. “I am unable to stop him patching through.”

“Peter, you there?” Tony’s voice came through clearly.

“Yeah,” Peter breathed out.

“FRIDAY alerted me you were out in the suit and your heart rate skyrocketed.”

“I’m fine. Just misjudged a building and scraped my knees up.”

“I didn’t think you’d be out tonight.” The sentence hung in the air.

“I just needed to get some fresh air.”

“Uh huh.”

There was a lull in the conversation; Peter could hear Tony’s even breathing and he shivered as a chill went through him.

“It’s a girl.”

“Huh?”

“May and...they found out today that they’re having a little girl.”

There was quiet at the end of the line for a beat.

“Well, that is wonderful news. She’ll be lucky to have you as her big brother.”

Peter was quiet as he swallowed down the tears and hoped Tony couldn’t hear him.

Tony’s voice came through gentle but clear. “You know that May will choose you, don’t you, kiddo? If that’s what you’re worried about...”

Peter closed his eyes and listened to the sounds of the city for a minute.

“Yeah, I do.”

That was the problem.

Chapter End Notes

So Peter is stuck between a rock and a hard place. 😞

Thanks again for the support and comments that have been coming in. You guys are the best.

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tony

Tony had forgotten just how beautiful the view from the penthouse balcony could be. He hadn't missed the city at all when they had moved out to the cabin. That had surprised him: the level of relief he felt at being away from the city he'd called home. The cabin was good for him, for them all, to be away from the hustle and bustle; surrounded by nature rather than hordes of people. Really, it was a way of turning his back on the bad memories: being inside the wormhole, the Avenger's family he'd lost, the ghost of Peter. So he told himself it was the quiet of the cabin, the affect of nature, the anonymity that were the reasons why he liked it so much. But that wasn't true. He was a coward. It was easier to turn his back on that part of his life than to let himself miss it; miss *him*.

Even at this early hour, the cars were already milling around below him like agitated ants. The city that never sleeps and all that jazz. More like the city that had a bit too much coke at a party, passed out in an alley, only to wake up and realise they are meant to be somewhere by breakfast. Or maybe that was another old memory of his.

He heard the door swish open – he turned to see Pepper coming over to him dressed in her favourite pajamas: fluffy pants with unicorns adorning them. A Mother's Day present chosen by Morgan who'd been certain it was her Mommy's style.

He silently wrapped Pepper under his arm, turning her towards the view and pressing a kiss to her forehead. They both watched the cars below for a moment as the sun started to peek above the buildings around them.

"It's so peaceful up here," Pepper murmured.

Tony hummed a response.

"You had a nightmare?" Pepper asked quietly after a moment had passed.

Tony switched his weight and nodded against her head. For once he didn't feel like being very vocal; so off-brand for him.

She let out a huff of air through her nose as she tightened her hold on his jumper.

"You haven't had one for a long time; since before..." Her hand stroked his side now: firm but gentle. "Do you want to talk about it?"

No, no. He really did not. But it didn't matter if he did or not, he wouldn't be able to get rid of the visual anytime soon. He let out a breath.

"It was about Peter."

She nodded as if she had suspected as much.

"Peter and Howard. He was...I couldn't stop him..." His throat was so incredibly dry right now; but an almost sob came out, surprising him.

He must have tensed because both of Pepper's arms were around him now. Tony buried his face in the safety of her neck as the images of a younger Howard smacking Peter full force played behind his eyelids.

She continued to rub smooth circles around his back until his breathing slowed down. Tony stepped back from her feeling more centred but no less wired.

"I should never have let him go back. The idea of Peter even sleeping in the next room to that guy makes my skin crawl Pep."

When he had rang her on Monday night and told her what he had found out; what he had seen and what Peter had said; she had cried. Pepper Potts, CEO of Stark Industries, who he could probably count on both hands the amount of times he had seen her do so, had cried solidly for five minutes.

"I know." Everything in her tone showed that she felt the same way. "But Peter said he would talk to May today, right?"

“That’s what he said. God, he sounded such a wreck on the phone last night. It took all I had not to go and beat the shit out of that guy.”

Pepper’s arm rubbed his. “That wouldn’t be wise. You don’t want to end up arrested and leave Peter dealing with all this without you.”

“If you’d seen what that guy did to him...” Tony’s jaw clenched: his teeth scraping together. “It was so much worse than anything my Dad ever did. Christ, it’s not even in the same ballpark.”

“Comparing isn’t healthy, sweetheart. Trauma is not a competition.”

Trauma. He’d never really considered what he had gone through at his Dad’s hands as that. Hell, the first time a therapist had said that it was abuse; he’d laughed. Over the years he realised how much it had affected him; everything from the substance abuse starting in his teens, how reticent he was with physical touch to how he avoided emotional attachments. He just never felt good enough.

Tony didn’t acknowledge what she said, just snuggled closer to her. He had to put aside his own issues and be there for Peter. He straightened his back and took a deep breath of the cool Manhattan air. Today was going to be a hard day for Peter and he would be there every step of the way.

Peter

Peter wasn’t sure what time he got back in, but it was late and sleep hadn’t come easy even then. He hadn’t come across anything too dangerous or difficult which was a blessing, as he would have either got his ass handed to him, or would have completely annihilated someone – he wasn’t sure which would’ve been better. Luckily, patrol had only involved stopping a few car thieves, scaring off some would-be burglars and helping someone push start their car. But he had felt useful and in control, at least for a short while.

He felt like he'd done nothing but think all night, but he must have gone to sleep, as he woke up rolling into a damp patch of his own drool.

He could hear the sounds of Kevin and Alfie having breakfast. His stomach groaned with hunger, but he didn't feel much like trying to avoid Kevin, nor deal with Alfie's 101 questions about toads or whatever it would be today.

He didn't get much choice in the matter when, just after he was dressed, his door opened.

"You're awake," Kevin said pointlessly.

Alfie's voice came from behind. "Dad, can I..."

Kevin leant back out of the doorway to respond to his son.

"I said go and watch your tablet in your room."

"Yes!" Peter heard his little voice exclaim before Kevin stepped in and closed the door.

"Imagine my surprise when I went to take a leak at 1am, and you weren't in here. Or anywhere else in the apartment." Kevin's eyes were set in a hard stare and the muscles around his neck were clenched. Peter didn't need his now screaming Spidey senses to know where this was going.

"I...um..." Peter stuttered. He'd been so in his own head last night that it hadn't even occurred to him that Kevin might check up on him.

"I thought I'd given you enough of a deterrent after the last time I caught you sneaking out, but you don't fucking learn."

Peter remembered the feel of the belt on his back. "I'm sorry."

"Always sorry, Peter. No one wants to hear it. No one wants you here."

Peter was paralysed as Kevin grabbed him by the collar and sent him to the floor. Before he could remember his promise to Tony, a big boot came crashing down on Peter's fingers and he cried out in pain as something snapped. All of Kevin's weight forced down on Peter's hand so he could kick into Peter's side four times. Peter tried to curl up, but Kevin's foot trapped his hand. Kevin picked up his foot again and stamped down hard twice in succession sending white hot pain through his hand.

"You won't be climbing out any windows any time soon, will you?" Kevin snarled.

He pulled Peter up by his t-shirt and slammed him into wall, the fabric straining against his neck as Peter panted, trying to catch his breath.

"You may think that you have your Aunt wrapped around your finger, but she'd be devastated if she knew about this." Peter was surprised that he and Kevin were on the same page about something. This was the last thing he wanted her to know.

"With this pregnancy, she's not up to any more stress from you. So, for her sake, I won't tell her about you sneaking out again."

Oh, he doesn't mean she'd be devastated about him hitting me, go figure.

"That's so kind of you." Peter couldn't help but mutter which earned him a swift uppercut to the newly cracked ribs on his left side.

Kevin let him go and he crumpled to the floor. Peter stayed there, panting through the pain with no other option than to wait for it to subside. He was aware of the sounds of Kevin leaving the room and the further away noise of him and Alfie leaving the apartment. He tried to move, and the spike of pain shot bile up his throat and he suppressed a gag. No moving just yet. He just let himself lay there and concentrated on breathing in and out. In and out. It was only then that he came to a realisation: he'd broken his first ever promise to Tony.

—

Peter slipped into the Chemistry lab and felt all eyes on him. The teacher looked up and Peter came over and handed him the late slip.

“Ok, Peter, your lab partner will fill you in.”

Peter, being careful with his ribs, slid slowly up on to the stool next to MJ.

“Hey,” he breathed.

She looked at him from the side.

“You look like shit.”

“Good morning to you too.”

Peter’s phone whirred in his pocket and he pulled it out. There were several messages from Tony.

TS: Good morning Underoos.

TS: You get some sleep?

TS: Hello?

TS: Parker? If I have to say ‘remember the deal’ one more time, I’m going to have an aneurysm.

Peter typed as quickly as he could with his left hand.

PP: Overslept and late for school. Chill.

The message came straight back.

TS : Chill? Chill? I am Tony Stark, I do not chill.

PP : You're gonna get me in trouble with the teacher for being on my phone. Talk later.

TS : Fine. Hopefully they can teach you to be less cheeky.

Peter half smiled at that and tried to concentrate on what the teacher was saying.

“What did I miss?” He murmured to MJ.

“We have to write up the experiment from yesterday.”

Peter pulled his notebook out and started searching his bag for a pen. There was a crisp tap as MJ put a pen next to him with an eye-roll.

He smiled in thanks to her and went to reach for it. He inhaled a gasp as he tried to pick it up with his injured hand.

“What the hell?” MJ was looking down at his swollen hand, her face crumpled into a tight frown.

“Trapped my hand in the door – hence my lateness.” Wow, he was really getting slick with the lying. He hadn’t even paused.

“You clutz.” She let out a soft chuckle and her frown reduced.

Peter made to try to pick the pencil up again, but MJ stopped him with a hand on his arm. “You can just take a photo of mine later.”

“Thank you,” he smiled, relaxing into his seat a bit more.

By the end of the lesson, Peter could barely concentrate. His fingers were throbbing even worse than before, surpassing the pain in his ribs, and he felt beads of sweat forming at the nape of his neck.

He was relieved when the bell rang. He was out in the hall when MJ spoke to him again.

“You should get that looked at. It’s really swollen.”

“Yeah, maybe later. Look, I’ve got to go and...y’know...before class.”

She gave him a sharp nod. “Later, loser.”

Peter dashed into the bathroom and into a stall. He pulled out his hand and studied it. Two fingers had ballooned, and the rest of his hand was a blue and purple mess. He pushed down into the flesh of one of his fingers and let out a groan at the burst of pain. He could make out the misalignment of the broken bone. If he left it, with his healing factor, - if it ever decided to kick in – then it could heal all wrong. He took a deep breath and manipulated the bones as close to inline as he could. The pain was like a flash and he couldn’t stop himself gagging into the toilet, bring up bile and nothing else from his empty stomach. He dropped to the floor and leant his head against the stall door before taking a deep breath and reaching for the other finger.

—

Tony

Principal Morita was actually not doing so badly. Tony had gotten used to people being overly sycophantic during his lifetime. First with his Dad and then with himself, when his innovations rose to popularity. When they moved to the cabin, Tony had gotten used to a level of anonymity he’d never had before. The hero worship had mostly stopped – I mean they’d thoroughly lost and though most people didn’t actively blame him for all the missing loved ones, it had certainly taken the shine off them as ‘heroes’. Since they’d reversed the Blip, the levels of hero worship had raised considerably. The world was in a collective grief reversal. So happy to have their loved

ones back but also fearful of losing them again. He feared for the Blipped Generation – they would most certainly grow up with the worst kind of helicopter parents.

Principal Morita had been talking about his family to Tony. This was another thing Tony had to get used to – people now wanting to stop and thank him for bringing back their loved ones. The years before the Infinity Wars had been filled with people who had been critical of the Avengers, which led to the whole awful situation with the Accords. The only good thing that came out of the fight with Thanos was the team back together.

“There really is no need to thank me, Principal Morita. We all lost people in the Snap. Really, it was the most selfish thing I ever did.” Tony’s words seemed to ease the Principal’s need to thank him and Tony saw the man visibly relax.

“I think it’s great that you’ve started Peter’s internship at Stark Industries again. It’s a wonderful opportunity for him.”

“We’re lucky to have him. He is...kids like him...they’re going to be the best of us.”

A knock on the door interrupted them.

“Come in,” Principal Morita called out.

A pale, exhausted looking Peter came into the room, one hand stuffed deep into Tony’s old hoodie. He clocked Tony and Tony realised he could now add bewildered to that description.

“Mr Stark, what are you doing here?” Oh, and now let’s add mistrustful.

Tony stood up. “You left your bag at the lab. I was in the area, so I thought I’d better return it to you.” That wasn’t entirely true. Peter had obviously been having a panic attack when he was in the suit last night. Tony wanted to see him in the flesh to check how he was, especially before he spoke to May. He’d cleared his day, and planned on hanging around Queens: he had every intention of being there to deal with the aftermath. May would need his help almost as much as Peter.

“Thank you,” Peter muttered. Tony watched as Peter took the bag off of him. He frowned: something was off about that.

“You mind if I walk him back to class? Got some SI business to discuss.”

“Of course, nice to see you again, and thanks, you know, regardless.”

Tony sent the man a warm smile before manoeuvring Peter out the door.

“Lead the way then, Mr Parker.”

Tony fell in step just behind Peter as they walked down the empty corridor. Something about his gait was off. The kid was hunched over and turned in on himself like he was quite literally holding himself together.

“Good day, kid?”

“What do you think?” Peter’s tone couldn’t have been any more typically teenage if he had tried and Tony stopped his lips from curling into a smirk.

“What class have I managed to get you out of?”

“Spanish actually...” That seemed to brighten Peter’s face a bit and it was a welcome relief.

“After my stellar teaching yesterday, I would think that ‘A’ would be in the bag.”

Peter snorted. “Thanks for bringing my bag over. But I could’ve swung by and got it later.”

“I figured you’d be too busy tonight.” Tony raised an eyebrow at him, and he could see the kid’s shutters going up. He pushed. “Right?”

Peter squirmed but, with a tight jaw, returned a nod.

“Got one more period left after this one? Then back home?”

“Yeah. The bell’s about to go. So, unless you want to get crushed by a hundred of your biggest fans, you might want to...” Peter jerked his head in the direction of door.

“Yes, and I guess I’d better let you get back to *‘el aprendizaje.’*” Tony pulled out his phone. “I’ll get Happy to pull around out front. Oh, opps...”

Tony dropped his phone intentionally and it clattered along the ground.

“Get that for me half pint, I’m an old man and you’re a bit closer to the ground.”

He watched as Peter bent down, his body tensing as he did and his dominant right hand still firmly inside the pocket.

Tony didn’t take his eyes off of him as he handed it back.

“Hardly, we are practically the same height, and I’m still growing,” Peter smirked.

Tony let his measured gaze fall into a smile. “Indeed, you are. Thanks for that. Well, see you later kiddo.”

Tony gave him a short salute which seemed to make the kid smile, which was something at least.

Tony was back in the car before the call he was making connected.

“Clint, the kid is lying to me again.”

—

Peter

Peter's heart rate had taken the entire last period to calm down after Tony's surprise visit. His first thought had been that Tony must've known about this morning, but he quickly calculated that unless Kevin had confessed, it was pretty unlikely.

Tony had just been checking up on him; probably having guessed that he'd been having an anxiety attack on patrol last night. That would normally have made him feel cared for, but now it felt stifling. Tony didn't understand that he couldn't implode May's world. He couldn't take what family she had away, not for a second time.

But he knew that he was never going to shake Tony. Tony was like a dog with a bone and it didn't matter what he did as Spider-man, Tony would always see him as just some kid that he had to save. He didn't realise that Peter was making an active choice in this situation.

He just didn't know what to do. But he sure as hell wasn't going to tell her tonight. Maybe he could get Tony to back off for a little while – maybe Kevin would get bored of it.

Maybe if I am better, he will leave me alone.

By the time he made it back to the apartment, he felt a bit better about it. He would be able to convince Tony some way, now that he'd seen nothing going on for a few days. Maybe he'd even believe that it had only happened once or twice. That Peter had been caught sneaking back in and Kevin was trying to discipline him, and it just got out of hand. Peter would become a master of spin if he had to.

He fumbled opening the door with his left hand, so unused to it, and eventually opened it up.

"Peter, look who decided to drop by!"

Peter's head snapped around to see Tony and May sat on the sofa; a teapot and cups sat on the coffee table. It was oddly reminiscent of the first time that they had met, but it wasn't giving him nostalgic feels.

“T...Tony! What are you doing here?” Peter managed to keep his voice even as Tony’s eyes fixed on to him.

“Oh, I was in the neighbourhood. Realised I hadn’t even seen the new digs yet. I was just telling May here that I could *not* stop thinking about what we were talking about last night.” Tony had on his dangerous smile and it made Peter’s stomach clench.

“O...oh really?” There was a slight squeak in his voice.

“Yes, I was saying how we ended up on Philosophy. You know, a bit of Nietzsche ‘*On the Invention of Truth and Lying*’...” Tony’s jaw twitched; his eyes on Peter’s.

“I had no idea you were into Philosophy,” May said.

“I dabble. Peter had a lot to say on it, didn’t you? What was the quote you liked of his: ‘*Silence is worse: all truths that are kept silent become poisonous.*’ Good stuff.”

May looked over at Peter with an impressed look on her face. He had to get Tony out of there before he blurted it out.

“Actually Tony, since you’re here, could you help me with my Computer Science project? It’s on my computer.”

“Sure thing, kid.” Tony placed his cup down on the table. “Be back in a bit, May darling.”

Peter closed the door behind him before turning to Tony who was casually looking at something on Peter’s desk.

“What the hell are you doing?” Peter snapped. “We agreed that I was going to tell her.”

Tony moved towards him so quickly that Peter stepped backwards and into the door.

“Yes, and you said that you’d tell me if anything happened and you didn’t!” Tony yanked his hurt

hand out of the hoodie; the light from the light bulb bouncing off the ugly, bruised skin.

Peter pulled it away instantly. Tony didn't put up any resistance just kept his eyes on the swollen hand for a second, before fixing a dark glare on Peter. "So, how do I know if you are lying to me about telling her too, huh?"

"I..." Peter didn't like being called a liar, but he had lied; for good reason.

"I'm betting you aren't going to want any tight hugs right now either." Tony pointed a long finger at his side.

"How do you...anyway, that's not the point..." Peter drew in a breath.

"You had no intention of telling her, did you? You were just stringing me along?" Tony's eyes bored into him. "What did you think was going to happen, Parker? You thought I was just going to keep being put off until I just decided not to care one day. You were just going to lie to me and hide injuries, what? Forever?"

"I don't know, ok. I don't know." Peter started to feel really sick.

"Well, it's a good job that I have all the answers. If you don't go out there right now and tell her, then I will." Tony's face left no room for negotiation and any fight Peter had left in him crumpled.

"Ok, okay." He slumped down on bed, placing his head in his shaking hands. "I'll call you after."

"I'm not going anywhere." If his tone hadn't been crystal clear, then Peter could read the easily displayed mistrust in his eyes, but wasn't offended by it.

Of course he isn't going anywhere. If he wasn't here, I wouldn't do it, would I?

"Can you just give me a minute?" Tony raised an eyebrow. "Just a minute alone... to gather my thoughts."

Tony pointed to the window. “You won’t be out that window the second my back is turned?”

Peter locked eyes with him. “I won’t.”

Tony nodded and after a slight hesitation he reached over and gave Peter’s shoulder a light squeeze. “It’ll all be ok. Just rip the band aid off, ok? A little bit of pain now and May will be happier in the long run.”

Peter felt himself nod back and the cold air on his shoulder as Tony removed his hand. He heard the door open and close and he could make out Tony talking to May – *“Ok if I perch here and check my e-mails?”*

Peter felt a moment of calm come over him as he knew what he had to do. He grabbed a bag from his closet and threw in some clothes, his suit and things that seemed important. The door creaked as he opened it, and he put the bag down outside before coming to the living area.

Tony was leant against the kitchen table, looking at his phone. May was folding some laundry up on the sofa; Peter could make out the tiny dinosaurs on Alfie’s socks from here.

“Where’s Alfie?”

“Hmm?” May half looked over her shoulder at him. “Oh, he’s on a playdate. Kev will pick him up later.”

Peter nodded and stepped forwards; gripping the back of the sofa even though it hurt his injured hand. His eyes caught the array of photos on the shelves. Photos of him, Ben and May together, of his parents and a small version of him in a park and there were a few of him and May together. But his eyes didn’t settle on those ones for long. He saw the photos of Kevin and May at their wedding. Alfie new-born, pink and yawning, lying on Kevin’s chest. Another of the three of them more recently, May looking up at Kevin with deep love, who had Alfie on his shoulders. His right hand released it’s grip on the sofa and slid back into his pocket.

“May, I need to talk to you about something.” He was aware of his heart beating fast in his chest. “Something important.”

May turned around and seeing his expression dropped the clothes in her hand into the basket and

turned to fully face him.

“What it is Peter? You’ve gone as white as a sheet.”

“There is no easy way to say this,” Peter dry swallowed. “I’m leaving.”

In his peripheral vision, Peter saw Tony jolt upright.

“What?” May’s voice cracked. “What are you talking about?”

“I’ve decided that I don’t want to live here anymore, and I’m moving out.” Peter kept his voice level.

“Pete,” Tony’s voice was gentle but concern shone through that one word. Peter put his hand up in a stop motion towards him.

“I don’t understand.” Tears had started to form, and he looked away from May so he couldn’t see them fall. “Why would you want to leave?”

She started to move towards him, but he stepped back with his hand up. That movement alone made her stop.

“I’m not happy here. I’ve tried, since I got back, but I’m not.” This at least was true, due to Kevin.

“Is it something I did?” She asked and he thought he might lose his nerve right there and then.

“No, it’s not your fault. It’s just...me.”

“We can talk to someone.” She gripped the hem of her top. “We can go to therapy, all of us together; maybe we should already have been with everything you’ve been through. I’m sure there are lots of kids that have been through the Blip that feel this way.”

“It’s not the Blip. It’s not any of that. I just don’t want to live here anymore. I’m not a kid anymore. I’ve got to concentrate on my school-work and getting into a good college, my work as Spider-man.” Peter steeled himself and carried on. “Alfie is too much and now another one coming. I don’t want to be a glorified babysitter.”

May shook her head in disbelief. “What are you saying? I know Spider-man is important, but you’re still a kid Peter. You can’t just go. Look, if we are asking too much of you, then we can talk about it. But Peter, you love Alfie, I can tell, and he adores you. You can’t just *leave*. We’re family.”

“No, we aren’t actually. Not really.” It physically pained him to say it – this lie – but he forced himself to pretend he didn’t care, and his voice came out even colder than he’d rehearsed in his head.

May dissolved into tears and turned to Tony in desperation. “Tony?!”

Tony’s face showed his genuine surprise and he just shook his head at her in confusion before looking at Peter with wide eyes. Peter had to get out of here.

By the time Peter picked up the bag and headed for the door, May had gotten around the sofa. She threw herself onto him, her chest heaving in sobs. He stood stock still and didn’t return the hug, clenching his jaw as he gently extricated herself from him, holding her hands away from him.

Her sobs were hysterical now and she tried to reach for him again, but he pulled away. “Peter, please don’t go.”

This jarred him for a second. He rarely disobeyed her, but he reminded himself that it was for her own sake. “I’m sorry, but I have to. It’s for the best,” he said quietly.

“Where are you even going to go?” Her face crumpled again.

Peter hiked the bag up onto his shoulder. “I’ll figure something out.”

Her brow furrowed deeply, like it only did when she got angry. “No, I won’t allow it. You aren’t going anywhere.”

He opened the door and she shouted again. "I'll call the Police and report you as a runaway. They'll bring you back."

He ignored the threat and smiled at her gently. "I'm sorry Aunt May...I love you...it's just something I have to do. I'll come back and visit you and Alfie soon, ok?" He paused for a second and made himself meet her eyes, his heart aching at the pain he'd caused reflected in them. "Thank you for everything you have done for me."

As he went through the door, May seemed to sag and Tony caught her, grasping her in a hug and speaking calmly.

Peter heard her start to sob hysterically as he bolted down the stairs and he could still hear her as he made it onto the street.

—

Tony

May's body heaved against him and Tony was torn between wanting to comfort the broken woman and wanting to go after Peter.

"Tony, I don't understand. Did you know about this? That he wanted to leave."

Tony shook his head, glad he could be truthful. "I had no idea he was going to leave."

May trembled beneath him and Tony guided her to the sofa. "Where...where is he going to go? Where is he going to sleep?" Her eyes flashed up. "Tony, he might listen to you."

"I'll try." He stood up but hesitated to leave her like this.

“Go, find him, please. Make sure he is safe.” May squeezed his hand.

Tony barrelled down the stairs and out into the street expecting to find Peter waiting, but he wasn't anywhere to be seen.

The town car pulled in front; the window rolled down to show Happy.

“You looking for the kid?”

“Yeah.”

“He shot off down that way like a bat out of hell.”

Tony jumped into the car and they took off down the road in that direction.

“FRIDAY, pinpoint Peter's phone.”

“He is currently three blocks west, moving rapidly on foot.”

She displayed the image on a map and Happy followed it wordlessly.

“He appears to have stopped,” came the AI's response.

Happy pulled up to the location and Tony jumped out scanning the streets. Before he could go into one of the shops, a noise caught his attention. He looked down an alleyway and saw the familiar hoodie.

He cautiously stepped closer. Peter was bent over being sick, the sound sending a spike up his own throat. He watched as Peter stood up and wiped his mouth, Tony could see his chest rising and falling rapidly.

“Kid,” he said gently. Peter turned at the voice and Tony thought he had never seen him look so young. “What did you just do back there?”

“It’s what you wanted, right? Kevin won’t be hurting me anymore. You don’t have to feel responsible for doing something about it.” Peter picked up the backpack and Tony could see his hands shaking. “She’ll be protected – she’ll have her family. If she has to lose me, then that’ll be a small price to pay. A small pain now...like you said.”

Tony’s heart dropped. “That is not what I meant by that, at all.”

Peter didn’t speak but started to walk past Tony.

“Where are you going now?”

“Away from you.”

“Peter!”

Peter spun on his heel. “I might have a chance at the youth shelter if I go now.”

“What the hell are you talking about, a shelter? Get in the car.”

“Mr Stark...”

“If you don’t get in the god damn car, then I will call my suit!”

An angry look flew through Peter’s face and then off as quickly, followed by the surfacing of tears in his eyes. He stomped off towards the car and got inside, squashing himself into the corner.

“Home, Happy,” Tony said as he climbed in next to Peter.

As the car pulled away, Peter's ragged breaths became audible. Tony reached out and touched his shoulder, but Peter jolted away from him.

"Leave me alone." Peter sounded more miserable than angry.

Tony sighed and sank back into the leather. What the hell had just happened?

Chapter End Notes

Thoughts, lovely people?

Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

OK, so I know a few days ago I said I probably wasn't going to be able to update as much. I promise I'm not a total drama queen. What happened was my partner treated themselves to a new PC game, which means I have had guilt free evenings editing. Yay for separate interests... 😊

Tony

The two of them entered the elevator, with Peter clinging to his bag as if Tony might try to steal it.

“Medbay please, FRI.”

Peter looked at Tony for the first time since the alleyway: a slight question in his glassy eyes.

“I just want to get you checked out.”

Peter sighed, but didn't fight him on it: it was like someone had turned a switch off in him. The doors opened and Peter stepped out.

“Wait for me in Medbay One, ok? I'm going to let Pepper know we're home.”

Peter nodded glumly and walked off in that direction.

“Penthouse, FRI,” Tony said and within a few seconds the elevator opened out.

Pepper was sat at the kitchen island with a laptop opened and papers strewn around. He'd never been more pleased to see his partner in life.

“Tony! When you said you were going to return Peter’s bag, I didn’t realise he’d moved to California...” She sent him a grin.

“I’m afraid we have a bit of a situation.” Her smile dropped. “When I got to the school, it didn’t take me long to figure out that Pete had been hurt again.”

“What?! What did he say?”

“Oh, *he* didn’t tell me, I could tell.”

Pepper’s brows drew together.

“I just knew he wasn’t going to tell May, so I decided to be there at the apartment when he got back.” Pepper’s eyebrow flickered up just a bit. “So, yes a smidge of pressure from me, ok? But he wasn’t going to do it Pep, and I couldn’t have him hurt again.”

The jolt of emotion in his voice made Pepper jump up and come over, taking his hand.

“I thought maybe if I was there, for moral support, it’d help. Then, instead of telling her the truth, he tells her that he doesn’t want to live there anymore, that he doesn’t like it and then, tells her that she isn’t really his family.”

Pepper’s eyes widened. “He what?! Why would he...?”

“He thinks he is protecting her by not breaking up her new family. If he told her the truth, she would get rid of Kevin, and he said something yesterday about not wanting Alfie and the new baby to grow up without their father.”

“That is...” Pepper paused. “That is so Peter.”

“An idiot. A self-sacrificing idiot.” Tony ran a hand through his hair. “He is going to have to tell her the truth. I should have but I just froze...”

“Tony, just calm down and focus. Where is Peter now?”

“He’s in Medbay, I want to check out his injuries.”

Pepper made a face at that, but gave his hand a squeeze.

“Go and do that and I’ll make sure his room is ready.”

“You don’t mind him staying?”

“Now who is the idiot?” she replied, kissing him on the cheek.

—

Peter was curled up on the hospital bed when Tony arrived, but he didn’t make any attempt to move. Tony thought he might be asleep but when he came around the side of the bed, he could see that Peter was staring straight ahead. Like he was looking, but seeing nothing.

“Pete.”

The kid’s eyes flicked to him like he hadn’t heard him enter.

“Can you sit up so I can check you out?”

Peter didn’t say anything but did as he was told.

Tony took his hand and examined it. The skin was purple and blue shades with two fingers swollen beyond normal size. He picked up a handheld scanner and held it over it.

“FRIDAY, do the honours.”

“Yes, Boss.”

There was a pause.

“Broken pinky and index fingers; beginning to heal.”

Tony set the scanner down. “FRI, are they in line to heal properly?”

“I reset them earlier at school.” Peter’s voice sounded almost detached.

Tony felt sick thinking about him doing that alone and the pain it must have caused.

“Treatment, FRI?”

“They should be splinted and strapped by a health professional.”

“FRIDAY, call Dr Cho...”

Peter shook his head violently. “No! C..can you do it?”

“Scrap that, FRI. Ok, but don’t blame me if you never become a master pianist.” Tony sighed.
“Can you take the hoodie off? It’s in the way.”

Peter unzipped it and Tony helped him pull it off.

Tony turned his hand over and could see the imprint of what could only be a sole on his wrist.

“He stamped on your hand?”

Peter nodded.

“There goes my wild fantasy that you broke your hand on his face.” Tony sighed again but said nothing else until he had splinted and strapped the two broken fingers to the middle finger, following a video FRIDAY found. He finished by grabbing an ice pack and putting the hand on it, which brought a hiss from Peter.

“Where else are you hurt?”

Peter looked like he was going to brush him off but seemed like he realised that there wasn't much point anymore.

“My ribs.”

Tony nodded.

“Let's see then.”

Peter eased his t-shirt up to show the affected area. There was only a faint whisper of the marks he had seen two days ago but on the other side there was now a blossoming bruise and the side looked slightly swollen.

Tony picked up the scanner. “FRIDAY?”

“Already scanning Boss. Two rib fractures, starting to heal.”

Tony tried to hold himself together as he got another ice pack and handed it to the boy, who hissed again as he pressed it to his side.

“So, you thought, ‘hey, I’ll just go to school with multiple broken bones’?”

Peter didn't even look at him and Tony made a note to calm down. He wasn't going to make anything better by telling Peter what he should have done. Pepper was finally starting to rub off on him.

"I've got to keep up my GPA or I'll lose my scholarship."

And when the kid said things like that, it made biting his tongue a lot harder to do.

—

It was gone 7pm by the time they made it back upstairs, but it felt much later to Tony.

Pepper was nowhere to be seen, but he imagined that she was putting Morgan to bed.

"Come sit up here."

Peter did as he was told like the walking Zombie he'd been since they got here. He looked even worse somehow; his hair dishevelled and hanging over his face as he looked down at the kitchen countertop.

"Let's get you some food."

Peter shook his head but didn't look up.

"Sorry for the confusion. That was a rhetorical statement. I saw you barf up earlier whatever little you ate today. I'm going to make a sandwich and you're going to eat it."

Peter wrapped an arm around himself but didn't protest.

The unnerving silence continued as Tony put together some sandwiches. As soon as the first one was ready, he pushed it in front of the teenager.

“Mangia.”

Tony followed it with a banana, protein bar and bottle of water next to the plate.

Tony watched out of the corner of his eye as the kid took a small bite of the sandwich and then picked at a bit of salad on the side. Tony was about to get annoyed and tell him to eat the god damn sandwich, when it seemed like a hunger switch had been flicked on and he began devouring it like he hadn't eaten in days.

Maybe he hadn't? He didn't know what kind of sick fuck this Kevin was, but it wasn't far-fetched to think he might have tried to control Peter's food. Abuse was more about power and control than anything else.

Once finished with the sandwich, Peter picked up the water bottle. Tony watched him struggle to open it with his left hand and reached over and did it for him. Tony suppressed a sigh as he saw Peter's cheeks colour. Had he always been this resistant to help, or was it just that it was him?

He heard Pepper approaching just as Peter had finished his banana. She gravitated straight to Peter; one hand on his shoulder and the other cupping his broken hand.

“Oh sweetheart. Is it broken?”

Peter stiffened and Pepper looked to Tony.

“Two fingers. Two ribs,” Tony said breezily.

Tony saw the tightening of Pepper's jaw and knew her well enough to know she was fighting tears at the moment.

Tony could see Peter ever so slightly moving himself away from her hold and Pepper, ever perceptive, released his shoulder straight away and sat down on the stool next to him.

“So, what are we having?”

Tony put a plate in front of her.

“Yum. But I couldn’t possibly eat all of this.”

Tony watched as she put half her sandwich on Peter’s plate without hesitation. After a beat, Peter picked it up and started eating it.

A lighter feeling settled in his stomach as he watched Peter eating. It was a start. He was kind of accepting their help – it was the thin end of the wedge, but it would do.

Tony sat the other side of Peter and started eating his own sandwich. He was in no way hungry, but it was something to do.

“Thank you for dinner.” Peter’s voice came out as a croak and he still didn’t look at anyone.

“You’re welcome,” Tony replied levelly, biting down his usual urge to make jokes.

Peter took his phone out, looked at it and frowned. As he put it down on the counter, the screen lit up and Tony could see May’s face. He saw Peter blanch and turn it over.

Tony caught Pepper’s eye and gave her a look. She cleared her throat and leaned towards him.

“So, Peter, about today…”

“I really don’t want to talk about it.” His response was quick and panicked.

“Well, we have to.” Tony didn’t mean to snap.

Peter swallowed but didn’t say anything. Pepper gave him a look that said ‘easy’.

“What you did back there...was rash and foolish.” Peter squirmed at his words and Pepper’s dark look his way intensified.

“But we understand your motivation,” Pepper interrupted. “Really, we both do.”

“You do?” Peter’s voice was hesitant but cautiously optimistic. He’d seemed so sure of himself back at the apartment, so in control. It was more of an act than Tony had realised.

“Yes, and you know that we care about you deeply and we only want what’s in your best interests. We couldn’t have allowed you to continue to be hurt by that man just to avoid upsetting your Aunt.” Pepper carried on.

“It is more complicated than that.”

“I know you *feel* that it is -”

“ - Then you don’t really understand.” Peter’s head was back down. “Can’t you respect my decision about even this? I can find somewhere else to live, but she can’t get a whole new family.”

“Don’t you think that she deserves the truth and to do with that what she thinks fit?” Pepper said gently.

“*‘Truth is simple, is that not doubly a lie?’*” Peter looked at Tony out of the corner of his eye.

“Is that a quote?” Pepper’s brow wrinkled.

“Nietzsche, yeah.” God, this kid was something else. Tony had had enough skirting around the issue. “I’m not going to debate this with you, philosophically or otherwise. I’m going to tell May the truth.”

“No!” Tony and Pepper jumped as Peter slammed his hand on the counter; it groaned under the force; his loud shout echoing through the room.

Tony watched as the kid’s eyes widened in horror and he pulled his hand back around himself.

“It’s ok...” Pepper breathed. It was more than Tony could react with as he was still stuck in surprise.

“Boss, you have an incoming call from May Parker and 7 missed calls.”

Peter’s whole body tightened.

“Well, speak of the Devil...”

“If you tell her, I will never forgive you.”

Peter’s eyes were firmly on his, carrying an intensity he hadn’t seen before. There was no anger in his voice this time, but it held more weight with Tony than anything he’d ever said. A pang in Tony’s chest knew that it was true, if he did tell May, it would forever affect his relationship with Peter. And that...that wasn’t something he was willing to jeopardise. There was more than one way to lose someone and he couldn’t lose Peter again.

Tony didn’t take his eyes off of Peter’s as he tapped the glasses.

“May.”

“Tony, have you heard anything? He isn’t answering his phone or texts. He isn’t at Ned’s...” Her voice came out in a garbled rush.

“I’ve got him. He’s safe.”

Sobs came down the phone and Tony saw Peter's whole-body tense again. Of course he could hear everything.

"Oh, thank God. None of this makes sense." She sounded wretched. "Did he say anything to you about why?"

Tony watched as Peter curled his hand around his phone; everything in his body coiled, ready to run.

"I think he is going through something."

Peter's body eased slightly.

"Will he come back?"

"I don't think so, not right now. Look, if he'll agree, is it okay if he stays here with us? Until he can figure whatever this thing is out."

"Yes, yes of course, as long as he is safe." The relief in her voice was palpable.

"I better go. I'll talk to you soon."

"Thank you, Tony."

Tony swallowed at the emotion in her voice and tapped on the side of his glasses again.

Peter seemed to crumple and if there hadn't been arms on side of it, Tony thought he might have fallen off the stool.

"I think that's enough talking for today," Pepper said, standing up. "You look exhausted. Let's get you settled in your bedroom, ok?"

Peter seemed happy to be led now, and he followed Pepper out of the room without looking back at Tony.

Tony

“You’re very predictable, Mr Stark.”

Tony just heard her words above the loud music.

“FRIDAY, turn the music down low please.”

“Yes, Miss Potts.” The music lowered to background level.

Pepper crossed the lab as Tony pulled off his gloves and chunked them on the motor he was working on. She cocooned him in a hug.

“I didn’t think it took that long to put a teenager to bed,” Tony said, pulling away.

“No, I left him alone after a few minutes. I thought you would want some time alone too.”

Tony nodded, though he wasn’t sure he felt any clearer in his mind about what had happened today. He let Pepper lead him over to the ratty couch in the corner of the lab.

Pepper’s hands rubbed circles on his arm as he let out his breath. “Well...” She began but didn’t continue the sentence.

“Yep, I put so much pressure on the kid that I broke him.”

“Tony, you’ve done nothing but try to help.”

“So, you’re saying the road to hell *is* paved with good intentions.”

She scoffed at him again before a silence settled between them, the pressure of her hand on his back grounding him while thoughts flew through his mind.

“He was going to go to a shelter, Pep.”

“What?” Her brow wrinkled.

“When I found him, after he left May’s. He said he was going to a shelter. Why wouldn’t he automatically think he could come here? I thought we were close.”

“You *are* close Tony. He loves you.”

“Pepper, he would rather go to a shelter than live with me.” Tony’s voice was dry. “I had to threaten him with the suit to get him in the car.”

Pepper pinched the top of her nose.

“Yeah, I threatened an abused kid. I’m that guy.” Tony massaged the top of his hairline roughly. “No wonder he doesn’t want to be around me.”

“This is Peter we are talking about. Peter who stayed at your bedside for two weeks; who convinced Dr Strange to bring him to Wakanda weekly; who made a homemade ‘*Welcome Home*’ sign for you.” Pepper smiled warmly in memory which caused Tony to as well. Art was not Peter’s strong suit. “Tony these past few months especially, watching you together, has been wonderful. He knows how much you care about him: that we are here for him.”

Her face then changed into a grim expression. “But he is also the same Peter who has put up with months of beatings to avoid causing his Aunt any kind of pain. Sweetie, you’ve been recovering

and it's not out of the realms of possibility that was why he didn't tell you. He probably wanted to protect you. He probably didn't want to be a burden."

Tony's heart clenched at that: he remembers how Peter had suggested not coming to the cabin after he'd had a bad bout of arm pain in front of him. What she said made sense for who Peter was as a person but, God, it hurt.

"Oh God," he buried his head in his hands, "this whole situation is such a shit show. If I tell May, I might lose him and I...I'm not sure I can. But that is just so selfish, right? I should do what is right for him, but I'm not even sure I know what that is."

Pepper clenched his hand now before straightening herself up as if she was drawing strength.

"I think a new plan of action is in order." Tony liked when Pepper did her CEO flex: he needed her guidance, now more than ever. "We need to be totally supportive of him from now on in. He knows we want him to tell the truth, but we don't push. Autonomy will be important to him right now. We just make him feel loved and secure here. We don't know the extent of what he's been through for the last few months, but I imagine his self-confidence has been chipped away at. Maybe if he has time to heal and get some of that back, he will begin to see himself worthy and want to tell May."

"And if he doesn't?"

"Then we will respect his choice. And we will keep being there."

Like parents should.

"OK, gotcha; no pushing the May thing for now. Act like his Dad."

"Oh Tony," her eyes were soft, "you know that you already do that, right?"

He did? Yes, he supposed he did. He tilted his head to the side and nodded a little.

"I'm going to get to bed. Miss Stark will no doubt be up early." Pepper leant down and kissed him

on the cheek. “Try to come to bed soon. We’ll need our wits about us tomorrow.”

Tony watched his very clever wife walk away. He was tired but he knew he wouldn’t be getting much rest tonight and he wondered if Peter would either.

“FRIDAY, what is Peter doing now?”

“He appears to be sleeping, Boss.”

“Good. Let me know if he wakes up.”

“Yes, Boss.”

Peter

Peter woke up to the sound of singing. It was a high tinkly sound, just out of reach of his hearing to know what exact song it was. He opened his eyes and saw the immaculate guest room. Oh yeah, he was at the Tower. His life imploded yesterday.

The clock on the wall said it was gone 6am. He’d just been so exhausted that he had practically passed out. He hadn’t slept for so long, and without nightmares, for ages. Maybe it was because his Spidey sense wasn’t buzzing like it always was at Kevin’s apartment.

He eased himself into the bathroom, his ribs stiff from sleeping in one position. They were a bit better than yesterday but not fully healed. His fingers were the same – the swelling reduced but they were sore when he moved them. He’d only had one non-thrown up meal yesterday so that was not exactly going to kick start his healing. After a quick shower – keeping his splinted fingers out of the spray – he managed to find an acceptable outfit out of the few things he’d shoved into his bag in haste yesterday. It would take him a while to get across town and into school from here. He pulled his backpack up onto his shoulder and headed out into the living area.

“Peter!” Morgan squealed when she saw him and as usual ran full pelt into him. Just as he had two days ago, he grimaced as she thumped into his ribs. He scooped her up and onto his hip.

“How’s it going, Mo?”

“You’re in trouble.” Peter’s stomach flipped a little at that statement. “You didn’t come and see me last night. Oh, what is wrong with your hand?”

Before he could fathom an answer, a voice called from the kitchen. “Morgan, Peter; breakfast.”

Peter put her down and she tugged at his other hand. “Hurry, Daddy made waffles.”

Morgan practically dragged him into the kitchen where he saw Tony, spatula in hand. Peter’s stomach flipped again. Tony had been pretty upset with him yesterday – well, ever since the whole thing with Kevin had come out. He wasn’t sure what kind of reception he was going to get.

Tony gave him a wide smile which didn’t quite hide how tired he looked.

“Morning Underoos; I’ve got Iron Man waffles or Captain America waffles. What’s your poison?”

Morgan pulled him over so she could whisper into his ear. “Say Captain America cos he always makes a funny noise.”

“Definitely Captain America.” Peter smirked.

Tony let out a wheeze and Morgan descended into giggles. “Treacherous children.”

He served them up as they were ready, adding another one to Peter’s plate every time it was empty.

After his fifth one, Peter had to cover his plate. “Enough, I’m going to explode.”

“Yeah Daddy, and then there would be Captain America all over the house!”

Tony chuckled; no doubt at that image. “Right Morguna, go and get your shoes and bag ready for pre-school.”

She ran off singing some Captain America theme tune she had made up.

“I can take her on my way if you like.” His route would take him practically past her pre-K.

“On your way...?” Tony’s eyebrow raised as he looked over at him.

“To school.”

“Oh, hold up. No school today. You need to rest, eat, sleep; repeat. Those injuries haven’t healed overnight, have they?”

Peter paused.

“I didn’t think so.” Peter started to protest but Tony put his hand up. “I already called May and asked her to call you in sick.”

A rush of air pushed through his lungs. “You didn’t tell her about...” He raised his hand.

“No, I just said that you were exhausted after yesterday and could do with a mental health day, to which she readily agreed.”

“She probably thinks I’m having a mental break after yesterday.” Peter closed his eyes.

“I didn’t realise you had such a flair for the dramatic. We’ll have to get you into acting classes.” Peter looked at him but didn’t see the hard lines in his face that he was expecting, just a soft smile. “Come on then. It will be a movie day. There is a couch with your name on it. I’m going to take Morgan down to Happy.”

Peter got himself settled on the big L shaped couch with his feet up. He was surprised when Tony came back in a few minutes later with his tablet in one hand and a blanket in the other.

“I thought you’d have to work.”

Tony threw the blanket over him, the soft faux fur tickling his nose. “I have a few emails to send, but otherwise I’m all yours.”

Peter felt a little jolt of nerves. Was this going to be a Tony Stark charm offensive to get him to change his mind? But the thought of just being with him was warming.

Tony sat next to him on the big couch and covered himself over with the blanket too.

“What’s your first pick?”

“We are reading *The Great Gatsby* at school, so I thought it might help to watch the movie.”

“You have a day off from school and you’re basically doing homework. Such a nerd.” Tony rolled his eyes at him and smirked.

“Takes one to know one,” Peter said, under his breath.

“Put it on then, Underoos.”

After the first film, Tony had gone and got some snacks for them which now covered the entirety of the coffee table. He came back in now with some bottles of water, one of which he chucked over to Peter who caught it easily.

Tony sat down next to him, his leg resting against his own.

“My choice now.” Tony picked up the remote and started searching on the enormous TV.

“Star Trek?!” Peter laughed. “And you called me a nerd?!”

“This is classic storytelling. Take it in, young buck.”

Peter shifted his leg out from under him as it started to go to sleep, dislodging his silenced phone from his pocket. He pressed the screen. There were multiple missed calls from May from last night and a few this morning. Just then a text popped up on the screen.

May: I don't know what is going on, but I do know you're hurting right now, and it's killing me that I can't help. Please call me. I love you.

A large lump grew in his throat almost instantly. He put the phone on the table like it had burned him.

“How...how did she sound, when you spoke to her?” Peter heard his voice crack.

He was aware of Tony stilling.

“Honestly, she sounded confused and...sad.”

Peter nodded as a tear slid onto his cheek. He knew that his leaving would upset her, but the reality of it had been so much worse. Her face yesterday, her begging him to stay. It had been too much. A wave washed through him and he struggled to keep the emotion contained, his body jerking silently as he tried.

“Kid...” Tony’s soft word, and the touch of his hand on his back, was all it took for him to lose control, a strangled sound making it’s way out of his throat. Tony’s arm slid around his shoulder instantly, pulling him back and onto his chest. Tony held him, stroking his hair, as he let himself sob.

Peter awoke to the sound of a steady rhythm. It took him a moment to realise that it was Tony's heart that he could hear. Judging by the rhythm and the depth of his breathing, he was asleep.

Oh yeah, I had a meltdown.

He knew he should probably be embarrassed but he didn't have the energy to be even that. He stayed where he was, lulled by the sound.

What had he done? He had broken May's heart; no, not broken, just a crack that would heal. She would move on like she had before. The new baby would be here in just a few months and then it would be easier to forget him. Alfie would go back to a life that never had Peter in it. *His* heart though; that would always be broken.

He looked at Tony's hand, which was curled around his wrist gently. Why was Tony doing this? Peter was always making mistakes, people got hurt; the people around him *died*. Why was Tony so intent on making sure he was ok? The real answer floated at the back of his consciousness, but he wouldn't allow himself to bring it forth and feel it. Love was dangerous; it always ended in pain. What if he messed up and it was Tony bleeding out on the sidewalk this time? He couldn't cope with another loss like that. He'd already seen Tony die once. He didn't want to watch that again.

"I can hear you thinking from here," Tony's voice reverberated through his ear as he spoke. Peter went to sit up, but Tony's arm kept a light pressure on him, pushing him back against his chest. "You don't have to move."

Peter let himself relax against Tony again, the heartbeat resuming against his ear a tad faster this time.

After a pause, his ear hummed with Tony's voice again; "Do you want to talk?"

Peter shook his head into Tony's chest.

"Ok, kiddo," Peter felt Tony's hand in his hair and enjoyed the weight of it; like he was centering him in this time and place.

Peter heard the elevator open.

“Morgan and Pepper are home,” he said, reluctantly sliding himself out of Tony’s embrace.

Both Peter and Tony yawned and stretched almost simultaneously, earning Peter a grin from Tony.

A few moments later the slap of sandals on flooring became apparent even to Tony’s senses, and a red face Morgan arrived in the doorway.

“Morgs!” Tony said, holding out his arms.

“Peter!” Morgan said, bypassing her now frowning father and jumping on top of Peter on the sofa.

“Oof!” Peter exhaled as she landed on his chest. He was relieved to note that his ribs felt much better.

“You’re still here!” Morgan exclaimed as Pepper joined them in the room, kicking off her heels with a sigh.

“Yes, Peter is going to be staying with us for a while,” Pepper said, as she reached Tony and gave him a kiss.

Peter frowned – he was? They hadn’t discussed it and he wasn’t sure if he should, but he didn’t know why he felt like that.

Tony caught his eye, seeming to notice his response. Tony gave him a warm smile that reached up to his eyes and it made Peter’s thoughts settle. Just take one day at a time, right?

Morgan let out a squeal and squeezed his neck extra hard before wriggling to get down.

His phone beeped and he glanced at it.

Ned.

Oh shit, Ned. He'd never responded to his calls or messages.

He extricated himself from Morgan.

"I'm just gonna..." He motioned to his phone and Pepper and Tony gave him kind smiles.

As soon as he got back to his room, he opened his message account and saw there was one from MJ too.

***MJ :** Parker, Ned is worried sick about you.*

He is driving me mad, let him know you are ok?

***MJ :** And me too.*

He flicked back to messages from Ned which were from last night.

***Ned :** May called me, said were you staying with me. I said no. Did I miss something, was I meant to say yes?*

***Ned :** She rang again. Said you moved out -asked me what was wrong. WTF? Call me.*

***Ned:** Peter, why aren't you answering?*

***Ned:** Why aren't you in school?*

***Ned :** Dude? I am freaking out rn.*

Peter's stomach flipped. He didn't mean to freak Ned out. But he hadn't told him about any of the

stuff with Kevin as he had so much going on with losing his Dad.

He sent a quick reply.

***PP** : Sorry Ned, things have been weird, but I'm ok. Talk at school, ok?*

Ned responded instantly.

***Ned** : I'm so glad you're ok. Can you talk now?*

***PP** : Not right now. Tomorrow.*

The idea of talking about what had happened or coming up with a lie was too much.

He flipped to MJ.

***PP** : Messaged Ned. I'm fine. Thanks.*

***MJ** : Ok loser.*

He bypassed the messages from May, not able to bear it. He then saw a message he wasn't expecting.

***Kevin** : May and Alfie are in bits. Get your ass back home now.*

Peter's heart rate sped up; why the hell would Kevin want him to come back – isn't this what he always wanted? A life without Peter in it.

May being devastated by what he had done was no surprise, but he hadn't really considered Alfie's reaction. Protecting Alfie from losing his family had been his biggest priority. After all, Kevin

had never so much as shouted at Alfie in all these months.

But there is still a chance...

Peter felt a shudder go through him at the thought. His decision was the best out of what were all bad options. He knew it was, even if Tony and Pepper couldn't see it.

Even putting that part of it aside, Peter couldn't help but feel mean that he hadn't even said goodbye to Alfie. It must be so confusing for him. They'd developed their own bond and he knew Alfie loved talking to him all about the thoughts in his little head. He'd really miss seeing him every day and knowing that he was safe. Peter straightened up as an idea started to form. You know what, screw Kevin, why shouldn't he get to see Alfie? The thought spurred him into action.

Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tony

Tony was only half listening to what Pepper was saying. She was talking about Board meetings and paperwork he hadn't done. Tony felt totally zoned out. Was it the impromptu nap? Or too much caffeine? As much as he liked to keep a firm door shut on his emotions, seeing the kid sob like that had been gruelling. He'd never seen Peter like that before – so raw; like a dam bursting its walls. It wasn't fair that this kid was going through another trauma. He remembered reading studies about Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and their potential effects on adult success in life. If anyone could be an outlier it was Peter Parker, he reminded himself, but still. No one goes through what he had and comes out unscathed.

“Tony?”

He looked up from his position staring at the worktop and into Pepper's slightly exasperated looking eyes.

“Yep, yep.”

Peppers eyes narrowed. “What are you agreeing to?”

“Whatever you say my love.” He studied the groove in the worktop again.

“I said that we should donate your collection of tinted glasses for a charity auction.”

“What?” Tony's head snapped to meet her pointed look.

“Why don't you just go and check on him?” Pepper sighed, her eyes softening somewhat.

“I thought you said I had to ‘give him space’.” Tony heard the slight whine in his own voice.

“Well, that was when you were going to go see him after he had only been in his room for ten minutes.” Pepper looked at her watch. “It’s been an hour and a half now. I think that would be acceptable.”

Tony still felt awkward – well, he was worried that Peter might feel awkward with him after their cuddle and sleep on the sofa.

“FRIDAY, what is Peter doing?”

“I meant physically go and see him Tony,” Pepper muttered and shook her head.

“I’m afraid that I don’t know. Peter left the building.” The AI buzzed.

Tony jolted upright. “What?! Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I did not have a protocol in place for that.” FRIDAY’s voice came back calmly.

“Did he leave as Spider-man?” Maybe he went on patrol; even with a broken hand, but he’d proven before he could be an idiot.

“No Boss, he went down in the elevator. His suit tracker shows that it’s in his room.”

“When did he leave?” Tony was on his feet now and moving towards the bedroom.

“It was approximately one hour ago.”

“Shit,” Tony growled as he got to the bedroom door and opened it; Pepper right behind him.

He scanned the room – Peter’s bag was still here, and some clothes in the corner.

“FRIDAY, track his phone.”

“Tony, you can’t do that,” Pepper said, looking wary.

“Like hell I can’t.”

“Peter’s phone is in the room.” The AI’s voice sounded.

“He left without his phone?” Pepper’s concerned voice showed that this was not a normal reaction from a teenager.

“FRIDAY – access Peter’s phone. Did he contact anyone right before he left?” Tony said, his heart frantic. Maybe he’d spoken to May and it had pushed him over the edge. He was so fragile right now.

“He replied to some messages.”

“Show me.”

“Tony, this is an invasion of his privacy,” Pepper said, a warning firm in her voice.

Tony ignored her and FRIDAY projected the messages as a hologram. Tony sped read a few of them. Wait, he hadn’t even told his ‘Guy in the Chair’? Ned knew about Spider-man – his most valued secret - but not this? Jesus, the kid had really not spoken to anyone about what he’d been going through.

He pushed that aside and saw that Peter hadn’t read the messages from May. Then he saw the last one from Kevin; his fists tightening at the words. Did that make him bolt? Worse, did he actually go back?

“Maybe I should call May?” Pepper said, obviously having caught up to the end. She started back out to the kitchen where her phone was. “He might have gone there.”

Tony followed her back out as he thought about how best to find him. He left on foot so he could get FRI to hack the CCTV cameras and see where he went. Subway cams too if he went underground. Before he could formulate the best course of action, FRI's voice chimed in.

"Boss, Peter has entered the building and is in the elevator."

The doors swished open just as he and Pepper walked the few steps towards it. Peter walked in casually, his gaze on the floor and some broken looking tablets under his arm. On realising the two were in front of him, he looked up, his eyes looking from one to the other with a slightly perplexed look on his face.

"Where the hell have you been?" The words burst from Tony's mouth in a shout before he realised.

"Tony!" Pepper snapped.

The kid shrank back a step, his eyes flickering wider for a second, before resettling the equipment in his hand. "I just went out to find some stuff to work with."

"You scared the shit out of us to go dumpster diving?"

Peter tensed at his derisive tone.

"I didn't think I needed permission to leave." He levelled an almost defiant look at Tony. Shit, Tony couldn't keep up with the swinging pendulum of Peter's emotions.

Before he could speak, Pepper did. "Of course you don't, Peter. We just didn't know where you were, and you didn't take your phone, so we started to worry."

Peter's hard expression relaxed and morphed into a neutral one. "I didn't want to lose it while I was searching around."

“That makes sense,” Pepper said carefully. “Now, can I get you something to eat?”

Tony watched Peter shake his head. “Would it be okay if I used the workshop?” Peter was directing his question at Pepper rather than him for unfathomable reasons.

“Of course.”

He nodded then and started to head in that direction, Tony noticing that he gave him a wide berth. Peter’s shoes squeaked on the flooring as he stopped sharply and turned back to Pepper with a sincere expression.

“I didn’t mean to make you worry, Miss Potts.”

“I know, sweetheart. It’s fine.” Pepper gave him a warm smile.

He nodded back at her and shuffled off again. Tony watched him go and let out a breath. Why did he feel so unsure of what to say and do? This was not the Tony Stark MO and he didn’t like the feeling of uncertainty that filled the bottom of his stomach.

Pepper sighed and rubbed the back of her neck. “I thought we talked last night about making him feel welcome and relaxed here. Shouting at him, after everything, is not the way to go Tony, you know that, yeah?” Although she was reprimanding him, her tone was so gentle it slipped past his automatic denial defence whenever he heard criticism.

Tony deflated. He knew he shouldn’t have shouted. After Pete alluding to going to a shelter yesterday and then he disappeared, Tony’d just felt so panicked and just so...worried. Pepper’s arms came around him and he pushed his face into the warmth of her neck; not wanting to have to express anything.

—

Tony headed down to the workshop after half an hour or so. He didn’t know if he was going to bring up the conversation, but he just wanted to be close to the kid. If he was around, maybe Peter would talk. If not, then well, having eyes on him might ease his own discomfort.

Peter was already looking at the door when he stepped through and it reminded him that he'd have to be cautious around the super hearing going forward. Tony could see his body was tensed, probably anticipating a negative response from him. *Nice one, Tones.*

"Hey," Tony said, cautiously.

"Hey," Peter said, immediately looking back down at the work-table in front of him.

Ok, clear signal he wasn't going to be talking anytime soon. Tony walked past to his main worktable. The last project he had been working on had been Peter's birthday present but he couldn't exactly work on it when he was right there. Luckily, it was out of sight. He pulled up another design – some alterations to Sam's suit to make it more durable. He fiddled with the hologram, watching Peter hunched over his desk working as he did.

After another 15 minutes where he honestly felt like he was just moving stuff around, there was a clatter of something metallic against the floor. Peter swooped it off the ground with a huff and was trying to use it again. Tony could see that it was something that required two hands and his strapped-up fingers would not allow it. The tool fell from his grip again and *'for fucks sake'* flew from his lips. Tony's eyebrows shot up: he wasn't sure he'd heard him swear in frustration like that before. Not even that one time he'd got caught in his own webs and Tony had had to rescue him. Peter started pulling at his bandaged hand and Tony was up and over to him in a few steps.

"Need a hand?" he asked.

"One that works yes," mumbled Peter, still trying to get the bandages off.

"Kid." Tony stopped him by the wrist and was relieved when he didn't flinch. He walked around the table.

"Do they feel healed?"

"Mostly."

Well, with this kid that could mean not at all. He bit back a retort.

“Let’s check; we can always re-wrap them if they aren’t.” Calm, calm: be calm.

Tony got some scissors from the first aid box before rolling a chair over to sit next to Peter. He laid his hand on his lap as he cut the tape off and carefully took the splint away.

“Let’s check your movement.”

He watched Peter’s face as he started to wiggle his fingers, clenching his fist in and out. “A bit stiff and sore, but not painful.”

“Good.” Tony patted his hand. “I think it’ll be ok to keep it off then.”

“Thanks,” said Peter pulling his hand away.

“So, what are you working on?” Tony asked, trying to get some semblance of normality between them.

“I’m just repairing the screen and part of the circuit board on this old phone.” He leant over and Tony could see that he was mostly done. “I just can’t get them to fit back together because of my stupid hand.”

Tony motioned for him to do it and Peter pushed his chair back so that Tony could reach. It was child’s play for him, so he did it quickly and barely looking. “All done.” He powered it up and it came on. “Good job.”

A flicker of satisfaction went over Peter’s face, but it was gone before it could settle; like he couldn’t allow it to be happy with himself.

“So, is the new prototype Starkphone I sent over so bad that you decided to go retro?” Tony said with a side smile.

“No, that phone is awesome. So many upgrades since I last had one,” Peter said, with a small

smile. “This is for Alfie.”

“You didn’t need to go trash surfing.” He made a ‘yuck’ face. “I’ve got some more around here somewhere.”

Peter rolled his eyes. “Thanks, but you’ve already been generous enough.”

Tony had forgotten how much the kid hated taking gifts. “Hey, I didn’t stop being a billionaire in the time you were away, you know?”

Peter still looked uncomfortable, so he didn’t push it. “Thanks, but I wanted it to be quite basic and only so he could call me...if he needs me.”

Tony could tell that the last few words held much more meaning. Peter was worried about Alfie being at home with Kevin. Tony’s manipulative side was telling him that this would be the perfect lever to push to get Peter to tell May or the Police. Pepper’s words came back to him; don’t push, just be supportive.

“Well, you’ve done a good job. Just program your number in, pop in a sim and you’ll be good to go.”

Peter’s face dropped. “I-I forgot about the sim and I don’t have any cash.”

Tony was surprised. He’d given him money a fortnight ago. “You already spent your babysitting wages?”

Peter tensed. “No, um, Kevin...took it.”

Tony felt himself stiffen up. Had he had it beaten out of him? He both wanted to know and didn’t want to know; the Schrödinger’s cat of answers. He calmed his breathing and his need to press the kid with questions.

“We’ll sort a sim out, no problem,” he said, trying to give the boy his easiest smile.

Peter

He knocked on the window gently not wanting to scare the little boy. Alfie sat up in bed: his eyes wide like saucers as soon as he saw Peter. Peter put his finger up to his lips and the little boy understood the universal signal for be quiet. Luckily the window was ajar, and Peter managed to slip it open and drop into the room. The little boy pummelled into him around the knees, almost knocking him down. Peter crouched and pulled him into a hug. A little sob came from his body.

“Hey buddy, it’s ok, don’t cry,” Peter whispered.

“Why did you leave?” His big eyes were like daggers in his heart.

“It’s really complicated grown up stuff.”

“But Mommy keeps saying she doesn’t understand, and she keeps crying.”

Peter thought his heart might stop.

“I’m sorry. I never wanted to upset anyone.” Peter pulled the boy closer. “Look, I came to see you because I want to give you a present.”

That seemed to pique Alfie’s interest and he wiped his nose on his sleeve as he watched Peter reach in his pocket.

“Now this is a phone that I made for you.”

“A phone!” Alfie looked amazed. “Daddy said I wasn’t allowed a phone until I’m old.”

An extra 'fuck you' to Kevin is always good.

“Well, this is a very special phone. It only lets you call one person – that’s me.” He got out his own phone as well. “You press this button and it will send a video call to me. So anytime you want to see me and talk to me, you can.” Alfie watched as Peter’s phone lit up with a photo of Alfie on it.

“Cool,” Alfie said.

Peter demonstrated a couple of times and then got Alfie to do it a few times before he felt satisfied that he understood what to do.

“There is only one thing. I need you to keep this a secret and not tell Mommy and Daddy.” Peter cringed as he said it; he didn’t like the idea of having Alfie keep secrets from his parents. But this was different; this was to keep him safe.

“OK,” Alfie said, worryingly not unsure at all.

“Now this is important. If Daddy gets really angry at you – like really angry - when Mommy isn’t here. Or if he...if he hurts you or Mommy. You call me straight away, ok?”

“OK, Peter,” Alfie said, nodding his head earnestly as he clutched the phone in his tiny hands.

Peter took out a charger and moved the toy box at the end of the bed. There was a power outlet there that was never used, and Peter plugged the charger in and pushed the box back, the end of the charger just poking out.

“We’ll just slide it in here.” Peter attached it to the charger and put the phone in the small gap in-between the toy box and the wall. “So no one finds it.”

There was a creak outside the door and Peter tensed. The sound moved away to the other side of the apartment and he relaxed.

“Come on,” he whispered, taking Alfie’s hand and guiding him to bed. Alfie complied, hopping up and Peter tucked the covers around him. “Time to sleep now buddy.”

Alfie gripped his hand, tears in his eyes as he looked up at Peter. “I want you to come back.”

“I know,” Peter said, not knowing what else to say.

He stroked Alfie’s hair until the little boy had fallen asleep; tears dried on his cheek as Peter slipped back out of the window.

—

Almost as soon as he had put his mask on, Karen told him Tony was on the line.

“Um, whatcha doing there, Pete?”

“I’m going to the opera. What do you think I’m doing?” Peter knew he sounded gruff, but after seeing Alfie, he wasn’t in the mood.

“Is that a good idea in your condition?”

“I’m all healed.”

“I didn’t mean physically.”

Peter clenched his jaw. He didn’t want to think about how he was feeling right now. Leaving Alfie behind, with even the smallest chance that he could get hurt, was like a splinter under his skin. Tony’s concern just made him feel more useless.

“I don’t need babying.”

“Peter...”

“I’ll see you later.”

Peter ended the call and swung off to see if helping someone else would stop the buzzing in his brain.

Tony

“Mr Stark...Mr Stark?”

Tony whipped his head up to look at all the holographic figures in the room with him.

“Yes?”

“We were waiting for your input on when we can expect the prototype for the next StarkPad. You said in the last meeting that it was imminent.”

Tony sighed. Of course he had said that two weeks ago. But since he’d been dealing with a distraught enhanced teenager, his mind hadn’t exactly been on his tech. Normally personal tension sent him straight into the workshop, but this hadn’t been the case this time. He was tinkering sure, but producing nothing useful.

“I say a lot of things, but I’d think by now that you’d know not to rely on them. You’ll get it when you get it.” Some of the faces twitched, including his wife’s. He avoided what was to no doubt be a pointed stare from her. He sighed. “Anything else?”

There was a disgruntled murmur before Pepper took over.

“Thank you all for taking the time to have this meeting on a Sunday. If there is nothing else, enjoy the rest of your weekend.”

The holograms flickered away leaving just Tony and Pepper in the room. She let out a huff and he couldn't avoid eye contact with her as she swivelled the chair around and stood up.

“You'll get it when you get it?”

Tony cringed, but then shrugged. “Genius doesn't work to timescales, you know that.”

She raised an eyebrow. “What have you and Peter been cooking up the last two days if you haven't been working on anything helpful to SI?”

Tony hummed. He wished he could say they had been, but he hadn't seen much of Peter. He'd been patrolling, or when he was here, only ventured out of his room for food. “Unless he's been moonlighting at another lab, I haven't seen him. Every time I try to speak to him he says he is tired or doing homework.”

“Or he is out patrolling,” Pepper said, fidgeting with her bracelet.

After Tony had convinced the kid that he should take Friday off from school as well, he had spent most of it patrolling. Spider-man obviously felt like a safer place to be right now and Tony understood the drive. Being Iron Man was like an extension of himself, but a powerful, more together version and he wondered if the same was true for Peter.

“If he's going to be staying here for a while, we should consider setting some boundaries,” Pepper said. “Curfew for patrols at least.”

“He hasn't been getting back late,” Tony countered.

“I know, but he's like a ghost around here. We can't ignore the trauma he's been through; we need to make sure he feels part of the family and not let him push us away. Meal times, curfew,

conversation – even if it isn't about what happened.”

Tony sighed. She was right, of course. But Tony still felt lingering guilt about pushing the kid. He didn't want to create a rift between them. As much as he felt like his father, he wasn't; and it created this weird grey area between them which left plenty of room for miscommunication.

“I'll talk to him tonight,” Tony said, tapping his phone on the table twice.

“We can do it together.” Pepper gathered her things.

“Yeah, I might save you that. It's me he is pissed at.”

Pepper tilted her head. “I wouldn't take it personally.”

“I forced his hand.”

“Yes, well in time he will see that you only meant the best for him, even if he can't see that now.”

Tony chewed the inside of his mouth. *If their relationship even made it that far.*

“Boss, Mr Hogan has arrived with your guest.”

Tony jumped up.

“Who's here?” Pepper said as Tony made it to the door.

He smiled as he turned back, “The Cavalry.”

The elevator shot Tony up to the penthouse where a bored looking Happy stood with his hands in his pockets and a nervous looking teenager stood looking out over the New York skyline.

“Mr Leeds,” Tony said, coming up behind him. The boy dropped his bag on the floor before hastily picking it back up.

“H-Hey Mr Iron- Stark,” the teenager stumbled. “You can call me Ned. Or whatever you want, sir.”

Tony had met him once or twice before when Peter had brought him up to the Compound. He hadn’t changed much, but then again Tony shouldn’t have expected him to, what with being dusted and all. He felt a stab of shame that he was glad that he had been, so Peter still had his ‘guy in the chair’.

“Ned, good to see you again.”

Ned swallowed; his eyes still lit up in awe. “You too, sir. Thanks for, like, saving the universe and everything.”

Tony nodded and suppressed a grin. “I’m glad you’re here.”

“Um, why *am* I here sir? You d-didn’t really say.” Ned’s face was starting to go red. “Cos I absolutely haven’t messed with the suit again. The tracker is still there, I promise, and —“

Tony put his hand up and the boy stopped babbling straight away. “You haven’t done anything wrong Ned. I, uh, I called you here because I needed to talk to you about Peter.”

“This is about him acting weird, right? I don’t know what is going on and he has barely responded to my texts since Wednesday, which is really weird, and then I got this weird call from May that she didn’t know where he was, and Peter replied but was super vague...’

Tony put his hand up after the third weird in one sentence. “Ned, he’s here. He’s staying here.”

The teens eyes widened. “Oh, um, why?”

“I’ll let him talk to you about that.”

“Oh right, he doesn’t know I’m coming?” Tony shook his head and Ned’s brow furrowed. “I’m not sure he would like me just turning up here. He doesn’t like surprises.”

Tony faltered a bit at that information, but pressed on; it was Ned, Peter would be happy to see him.

“Come on, he’s in his room.” Tony clapped his hand on Ned’s shoulder and led him out of the living area and into the corridor.

Tony knocked on the door sharply. After a minute or so, the door opened to show a dishevelled looking Peter, still wearing PJ’s even though it was almost noon. Tony’s heart flickered as he saw the dark circles under his eyes – so he wasn’t sleeping when he was holed up in the room.

“Ned!” Peter’s eyes widened. “W-what are you doing here?”

“Mr Stark invited me over. Can I come in?”

Peter stepped back lamely and Ned came through. “Oh my god dude, this room is amazing.”

“I’ll leave you to it,” Tony said with a smile, retreating down the hallway.

He heard Peter say, “I’ll be back in a minute” and the door close before he turned around to see Peter storming towards him; a dark look in his eye.

“What the hell is this?” he snapped.

Tony took a half step back from his obvious anger but kept his voice calm.

“I thought you might want to see your best friend.”

Peter was jostling from foot to foot; his hands wringing together and his whole energy chaotic. “I – I, he doesn’t *know*, OK?”

Tony must have given away something in his expression because Peter stopped jiggling and straightened up: all his energy suddenly focussed.

“You knew that he didn’t know...have you been looking in my phone?!” Peter’s eyes were alight.

“Not purposefully; when you disappeared on your dumpster diving expedition, we were worried, so I took a quick look...”

Peter threw his hands in the air. “You are unbelievable.”

“You’ve nothing to feel ashamed about. What happened...that is not your fault.” Tony couldn’t remember if he’d said that yet but it bore repeating.

“I – I know that,” Peter said, but his tone was weak. “That’s not the point. Have you ever thought about *why* I didn’t tell Ned?”

Tony stopped at that. He’d assumed it was because he was embarrassed or thought that Ned might tell someone.

“He came back from the Blip and his Dad was dead. *Dead*. Can’t be brought back,” Peter made a snap motion with his fingers. “And he needed **me**. When Ben died, he-he was the best friend anyone could ask for. And now it’s my turn to be there for him, not have him dealing with another – another Peter Parker pity party.”

Tony swallowed; feeling so many different emotions. He started to speak but was cut off again by Peter.

“Stop interfering in my life.”

Tony watched the kid turn on his heel and head back to his room; closing it with a slam.

Well, damn.

Peter

The door slammed; he hadn't meant for it to. Stupid super strength.

Ned was perched on the end of his unmade bed, his bag next to him and his eyes wide.

"Dude, did you, like, just shout at Iron Man?"

"Um, yeah, I guess I did," Peter replied, letting out a shaky breath.

"What is going *on*, dude?"

"I, um..." Peter felt his skin start to heat and he looked at a spot on the carpet as he tried to control his breathing.

"Peter, it's me. You know you can tell me anything, right?" Ned's voice was soft. "You told me about Spider-man..."

Peter looked up and gave a weak smile. "Well, I kinda didn't..."

Ned rolled his eyes with a smile and Peter walked over and sat at the opposite end of the bed from him; one leg underneath him.

Peter picked at a loose thread on the sheet. Why couldn't he just say the words out loud? *Kevin was beating me up.* He just felt so lame – he was meant to be a hero.

“Would it be easier if I asked questions?”

Peter shrugged.

“So, you left May's and you're living here?”

Peter nodded.

“So, something happened at May's. You had a fight?”

Peter shrugged again.

Ned's eyebrows furrowed as he was in thought. “But you and May don't really fight, so it must be Kevin.”

The name made him automatically tense: his muscles tight. *A stupid reaction to a name.*

“Oh my God Peter, did he...? He hit you, didn't he?”

Peter looked up then and caught Ned's distraught look before nodding and putting his head down. He knew the questions that would be coming; the same ones Tony and Clint had had for him just a few days ago. How could he explain to Ned why he let it happen? There was silence for a moment and this time Ned's voice was stronger.

“It wasn't just once. You've been acting off for weeks. He's been doing it – hurting you – for weeks, right? It was bad?”

Peter could feel Ned's eyes on him, but he couldn't look at him. He wasn't sure what the emotion was – *shame? fear?* – whatever it was left his throat starting to tighten; tears edging into his eyes. “Yeah.”

“Fucking hell Peter. Why-?” Ned cut himself off; the briefest of pauses before carrying on. “You didn’t stop him because of May...”

Peter shouldn’t have been amazed to know that Ned knew him well enough to deduce his main reason straight away: to know why he didn’t use his Spider-man abilities. Ned stopped abruptly enough that it made Peter look up. Ned was looking at the door. “You didn’t tell me because of my Dad.”

“You heard that?”

“The whole tower heard you shouting Peter.”

“Sorry,” Peter mumbled into his lap. “I’m sorry.”

Ned scooted over enveloping him in a massive hug. Peter wrapped himself around his familiar form. Ned pulled back after a minute; his own eyes wet.

“Obviously I’m really angry at Kevin and what he did. That is so, so wrong and all his fault, not yours. But I’m also pissed at you right now and I’m trying really hard not to be.” Ned wiped his eyes. “I’m not just your ‘guy in the chair’, I’m your best friend. You don’t have to... *protect* me from your life. I can handle it.”

“I know. I-“ Peter faltered. “If it makes you feel better, I didn’t tell Mr Stark; he and Clint figured it out. I didn’t tell anyone.”

Ned’s eyes flashed. “No, it doesn’t make me feel better. Why didn’t you tell someone? May?”

“She is so happy with him Ned. She’s having another baby. I can’t ruin it for her.” Peter hoped that someone would be on his side about this; that he wasn’t totally crazy.

“She doesn’t know *now*?!” Ned’s eyes looked like they were going to jump out of their sockets.

Peter shook his head.

“Jesus, Peter. She loves you; she wouldn’t want to see you hurt.”

“Well, I won’t be now I’m here.”

“No, I guess not.” Ned chewed on that obviously wanting to say more. “This is a lot to take in.”

Peter nodded: his body tingled all over and a deep headache settled in behind his eyes.

He felt Ned’s hand encompass his. “No more secrets from me. Please.”

“OK.” Peter felt exhausted; he’d been carrying this alone for so long, it felt weird to have people knowing about it.

They both laid back on the bed then, looking up at the ceiling. Peter let his eyes track to his friend – Ned’s foot beating a rhythm on the floor. He could practically see all the questions Ned wanted to ask, but didn’t as he sensed Peter was at his limit. He was a good friend.

They sat there for a few minutes and Peter thought about returning to school tomorrow. He wasn’t normal at the best of times but he wasn’t sure how he would cope pretending to be at the moment. “Um, do you think I should tell MJ?”

“It’s MJ; she probably already knows.”

Peter let out a small laugh at that.

“Do you want me to tell her for you?”

Peter gulped; he wanted her to know. They were too good of friends to not share it now that the cat was out of the bag; but the idea of forming the words and not breaking down made him feel sick. “Yeah, please.”

Ned nodded and they lapsed into silence again.

“You were kind of a dick to Mr Stark.”

Peter propped himself up on one arm. “What?”

Ned mirrored his body language. “You shouted at him after he helped you and was nice enough to let you stay here and smart enough to call me.”

“He’s the reason I left – he threatened to tell May about Kevin.”

“Oh, he’s such a bad guy stopping you getting beaten up.” Ned’s voice dripped with sarcasm. “You are so bad at letting people help you, it’s like pathological.”

Peter lay back down with a huff. “Oh, shut up,” he said, without any bite.

Tony

The cup made a clinking sound as it hit the table and that was what made Tony look up from the calculations he was trying to decipher.

Peter was in front of him. One hand slung low into his pocket and the other tugging at the hair on the nape of his neck.

“Thought maybe you might fit another coffee in....” Tony could sense the forced ease in the kid’s tone.

“You know me. I never say no to coffee.”

“I might have put an extra shot in there too,” Peter said, a ghost of a smile on his face.

“Breaking Pepper’s rules, huh? I didn’t know you had an active death wish, Parker.”

That pulled a smirk out of him. “Hey, remember snitches get stitches.”

Tony didn’t like the way Peter was hovering above him; like he might decide to take flight at some point. His appearance here, with coffee, had all the hallmarks of an olive branch and he didn’t want to lose that.

“Take a load off?”

Peter smiled then; like he’d been waiting for the invitation. His leg pressed briefly against Tony’s before he curled it up underneath him; Tony missed being able to do that without hearing audible groans from his joints.

“What are you working on?”

“Fury asked me to do some tests on some new software they’re going to implement. Which basically means he showed me a bunch of crap knowing that I wouldn’t be able to rest sending it back to the team as it is, so I’ve started from scratch. Manipulative Pirate...”

“I thought you were retired from Avengers work?”

“More of a consultant. But if Pepper asks, then yes.”

Peter smiled at that.

“I’m meant to be working on the next StarkPad prototype. Maybe you could give me a hand after school? I could do with a young mind with his fingers on the pulse of his generation, yada yada.”

“I’m not great at coding to be honest...it’s more Ned’s thing.”

Peter was nothing if not modest. He excelled more in chemistry for sure, but he still outshone most people in coding.

“I doubt that...maybe your hacker friend could take a look at it too. If you wanted him to come over again, I mean.”

An emotion he couldn’t pin flashed through Peter’s eyes. “He’d love that...like, *really* love that, never stop talking about it ever again level love.”

Tony nodded. “Well, I’d hate for him to miss out on his lifetime’s worth of talking points.”

Peter smiled before looking away for a second. His eyes then hit Tony with intensity. “I’m sorry that I shouted at you, that I was *so* rude...”

Tony held his hand up. “It’s fine...”

“No, it’s not.” Peter’s voice raised but it wasn’t a shout like last time. “I feel like I’ve done nothing but shout at you since Monday. You don’t deserve that from me.”

“Maybe, maybe not. I shouldn’t have ambushed you with Ned. I just wanted you to talk to someone...” Tony paused but couldn’t stop himself from asking. “Did you...?”

Peter nodded. “I-I told him the outline of what happened. He was pissed at me, which I wasn’t expecting.”

“If the shoe was on the other foot, would you be?”

Peter looked away as he thought about this. “Yeah, I guess I would be a bit.” He cleared his throat. “I get why you were so angry at me.”

“I wasn’t angry at you Peter.” Tony looked at the teenager in front of him and decided to be

honest. “I was scared.”

“Oh.” Peter’s forehead crinkled.

“Scared that you were hurt, scared that you didn’t trust me...”

“I do trust you Tony. I really do. I...it’s just that you were recovering, and I didn’t want to burden you with my small fry stuff.”

Protecting other people as always. Pepper was right. Tony’s stomach clenched at the thought of Peter in pain and telling himself that Tony wasn’t up to knowing about it; to think that if he did, he’d be a burden.

“You could never be a burden to me, or to May. Don’t believe a word that came out of that asshole’s mouth.” Tony was hazarding a guess that Kevin had said shit like that to Peter and the look on his face only confirmed it.

“Yeah, well...” Peter let it hang in the air. “So, show me what you are working on...”

Peter edged closer to him, his shoulder pressed against Tony’s. A signal that he was done talking. Tony thought about pushing him, but decided against it. The kid didn’t need any more pressure right now. Tony tilted the tablet towards him and started talking.

Chapter End Notes

OK, so I didn’t really intend the ending of the previous chapter to sound like a cliffhanger. So apologies to everyone who read this chapter expecting some fireworks and then were disappointed.... ☺

Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Peter

“So, Ned told me.” MJ’s voice was clear, but low as she sat down at the lunch table next to him. Peter caught eyes with Ned, who save him a small smile.

“Yeah,” Peter’s voice was croaky. “We thought you might already have figured it out.”

“I had an inkling; you suck at keeping secrets. Knowing I was right doesn’t make it suck any less.” She bit into her apple and chewed it while looking at him. “I’m sorry that happened to you. How are you doing?”

Peter felt hot under her stare. He led with a shrug.

“Your shrugs are very communicative. Like interpretive dance.”

Ned snorted.

“Let me take stab at converting it to language. *‘It was shit. I don’t want to talk about it. If it gets too much, I promise I will come to my best friends.’* Did I get it right?”

Her gaze was firm but warm. He looked to Ned whose eyes were dark pools; Ned who would much rather he spoke about it, cried it out, but as always was willing to do anything to help him.

“Nailed it,” Peter replied with a small smile.

He was surprised when he felt her warm hand wrap around his arm: she wasn’t massive on physical affection and he could probably count on one hand how many times she’d purposefully touched him. He felt Ned’s familiar hand do the same on his other forearm. The warm weight of

both of them sent a soothing swirl into his stomach and a gush of tears into the back of his eyes. He shot them both what he hoped looked like a thankful smile.

MJ withdrew her hand but let her shoulder knock into his. “So, living with Tony Stark now, huh? Do you know if he offsets his Iron Man related carbon footprint? If not, you should really get on to him about that...”

“I’ve got to go and do my homework and you should be asleep,” Peter said softly, looking at the excitement in Alfie’s eyes.

“But Peter...” Alfie tried to use his big, brown eyes against him, but somehow the medium of video calling didn’t make them quite as effective.

“We’ll talk again soon,” Peter said and tried not to feel bad when he saw the disappointment. Luckily, it didn’t last long.

“Ok,” Alfie didn’t stifle his yawn. “Don’t forget it’s my birthday soon.”

Peter laughed. Alfie had mentioned it 3 times already in their 10-minute call. “I won’t forget.”

They said their goodbyes. They’d been having these little chats every couple of days and it had gone from being a painful reminder to a pleasant experience quite quickly. It usually involved Alfie showing Peter pictures he’d drawn and Lego creations.

He opened up his messages again and went to the ones from May. He’d been looking at the invite to Alfie’s birthday party for the last week. May had added a message to the invite.

‘He’d be over the moon if you could come. So would I. Love you, Miss you, May.’

His throat was tight. It had been almost two weeks since he left. He hadn’t spoken to May, but he’d replied to her texts; never responding to anything she asked him about why he had left. She had cottoned on to this within a few days and stopped asking; now they just chatted about neutral

topics. He wanted to be in contact with her; at least in this small way he still could be close to her. He didn't want her to think that she had done anything wrong.

Life at the Tower had gotten gradually better. Pepper and Tony had insisted that they have mealtimes together and spend some time together in the evenings – even if it was just him doing his homework next to them while they worked. He knew they wanted him to talk more about what had gone on, but they didn't push him. It was a surprise but he was grateful; making it less of a large stone tied around his waist, and more like swimming in clothes. Heavy, but manageable.

Gripping the phone, he made his way out to the living room – Tony and Pepper were curled up on the couch – she was watching something on the TV and he was tapping out some calculations on his Starkpad.

“Hey kid,” Tony said, not looking up from what he was doing.

“Can I talk to you both about something?” Peter blurted out.

That got both of their attention and the TV was soon on mute.

He perched on the arm of the armchair; turning the phone over in his hands.

“So, it's Alfie's birthday party on Sunday,” Peter began, watching their neutral expressions, “and I think that I'd like to go.”

Tony's eyebrows raised but Pepper's stoic expression remained unchanged.

“Ok...” Pepper breathed.

“Will Kevin be there?” Tony said quickly.

Peter looked down at his phone before back up at Tony. “It's his son's birthday, I imagine he would be.”

Tony sat back with his arms crossed. “Then I’m coming with you.”

Peter suspected that was what he would say. “I’m not sure that’s a good idea...”

“I can restrain myself from punching him, if that’s what you’re worried about.” Tony said, but his clenched fists told otherwise.

“Tony, Peter is right. He doesn’t need to be worrying about what you’re going to do, as well as everything else,” Pepper said, before turning to him. “Are you sure about this?”

Peter wasn’t but he nodded anyway. It would make Alfie so happy.

“Well in that case, I’ll accompany you. May sent an invite for Morgan, but I told her that I’d let her know,” Pepper said, giving him a soft smile. “I’ll tell her that we’ll attend but I won’t mention you, in case you change your mind nearer the time. Sound good?”

Peter relaxed – that was a good idea. Pepper seemed to realise his uncertainty without him expressing it.

Tony let out a huff. “So, all my family are going to a party and I get left here?”

Pepper let out a small laugh.

“We’ll bring you some cake,” She walked over towards Peter and gave him a hug. “Thank you for bringing this to us. And don’t worry, I’ve many years experience of not reacting around men I’d like to punch.”

She indicated her head to Tony and gave Peter a wink.

The day of the party came quicker than he expected. Tony had tried to be the one to drive them, but Pepper had seen through his not-so transparent idea immediately. She had relented enough to allow Happy to drive them and this seemed to make him relax. Peter felt bad for Happy. He was no doubt going to be getting bombarded with calls for updates.

By the time they arrived at the party, Peter's nerves were mixed with another feeling - that of being well protected.

Pepper kept her hand on his back as they walked into the play centre. It was like an outdoor-indoor venue with slides, climbing frames outside and party areas and soft play at the back.

"Peter!"

Peter found where Alfie's shout came from and saw him running over, picking him up when he launched into his arms.

"You came!" Alfie said, his arm around Peter's neck as he squeezed him.

"I did. Happy Birthday kiddo." Peter realised how he sounded like Tony in that moment.

He looked up to see May coming towards them – a look of cautious shock on her face. She looked tired and a little slimmer than when he had last seen, except for the more rounded stomach.

"Hey," he said, not knowing what else to say.

"Hey," she replied, her eyes full of emotion.

Pepper stepped forward.

"It's so lovely to see you May. Thank you for inviting Morgan, she's been so excited."

"Come on, Peter," Alfie wiggled out of his hold and to the floor. He grabbed Morgan's hand too and tugged. Peter shot May a weak smile as he let himself be pulled away.

The kids insisted that he play on the slides with them – even though he was far too big. Despite this he still kept alert of the rest of the party. He'd clocked Kevin early on, talking with what he assumed were some of the other Dads. Then he'd been stationed at the grill for the last half hour. May had talked to Pepper for a long while and part of that conversation he could tell was serious, with both of them looking his way.

"Time to come in for food kids," May walked around calling over the kids from play.

Morgan had already ran over and so Peter hoisted Alfie up onto his shoulders. "Come on, Birthday Boy."

Peter could feel the little boy's giggle radiating through his shoulders as he enjoyed being high up.

There was a long picnic table with a special hat in the middle, so he put Alfie down in that spot. May was filling up paper cups with water and Pepper and some of the other parents were putting out paper plates.

"Can I help?" he asked May.

She smiled at him.

"Um, yeah, thanks, can you grab the tray of hot dogs from Kevin?"

Peter forced a smile onto his face and nodded.

Pepper went to go instead but he put his hand up to gesture it was ok. He walked the few feet to the grill area; Kevin was laughing with some of the guys but stopped when he saw Peter approach.

Peter pushed back the tight feeling in his stomach. He didn't need to be scared anymore; Kevin wasn't going to hit him here. He gritted his teeth and met his eyes to Kevin's when he made it to the grill.

“May asked me to bring the hot dogs over.”

Kevin didn't say anything for a moment and just stared, before turning behind him and picking up a tray of hot dogs.

Peter took it off him with a nod before heading back to the party area. Pepper caught his eye and he gave her a reassuring smile.

The rest of the party went by quickly with hot dogs, treats and a big Happy Birthday singalong as Alfie cut the dinosaur cake. Alfie insisted that Peter sit by him when they did, and Peter registered Kevin's flicker of annoyance with pleasure.

Alfie started opening his presents, which included a massive Lego set from Tony and Pepper. As he got to Peter's gift, Peter felt a flash of nerves go through him. He hoped Alfie liked it.

He ripped the wrapping paper off and pulled out the little robot. It was a classic design: rectangular body, with long arms mounted on track like wheels. Alfie pressed the button on it and it came to life. *“Hello Alfie, my name is Titch and I'll be your friend for ever.”* The wheels moved him towards Alfie and two long arms reached out like they were giving him a hug.

“I love him Petey!” Alfie hugged the plastic and metal figure to his chest.

“Where did you get that?” One of the parents asked.

Peter felt heat creep up his neck.

“I made it,” he admitted, “with a little help.”

He'd knocked it up in the lab with Tony this week – it had a more expensive battery than he would've put in it, Tony insisting that was important for kids toys.

The other parents clucked their approval and May looked at him with pride.

“Piñata time kids,” Kevin announced, his timing transparent.

The kids followed Kevin to the other end of the area where the piñata had been hung up and Peter watched as the kids tried to bash it open.

He felt his phone vibrate in his pocket and he pulled it out.

TS : How is it going?

PP: All good. Just one ass-kicking so far.

TS: Jesus kid.

PP : :P See you at home later.

TS : X

A kiss in a text from Tony Stark; how times change.

A hand slipped into his then and he didn’t need to look to know it was May’s. He gripped it back and she gave it a squeeze but didn’t let go.

They both looked on as the kids took turns again trying to open the straw donkey.

“How have you been? You look good; better.”

“Yeah, I am,” he breathed out, “so how is the Splodge? Is she kicking more now?” Peter tried to move the conversation away from him.

May smiled, “Oh yeah, she’s going to be a headbanger I bet.”

The kids were getting annoyed at the lack of candy so some of the parents were taking turns. This donkey was taking stubborn to a whole new level. Kevin got up to have a go.

“Is Alfie still excited about having a sister?”

She raised her eyes, pushing her dark hair behind her ear. “Well, sometimes. I think he’d be more excited to have his big brother back though.”

Peter tensed. Luckily the tension was broken by the small boy.

“Peter hasn’t had a go.”

Alfie took the stick off Kevin and ran over to give it to Peter, grabbing his hand. He missed May’s hand as he pulled away.

“You want me to end this?” He asked her quietly, his eyes lifting towards the piñata.

She smiled widely at him and nodded.

Peter made his way to the gaggle of kids and gave the piñata, what for him was, a weak whack. Candy exploded out of it, the kids screamed and all the adults, except Kevin, clapped. Peter held out the stick to him and he took it with a thinly veiled scowl.

Partygoers started to leave. Pepper and Peter helped with some others to clean up the table.

“Are you ready to make a move?” Pepper asked and he nodded and followed her over to May.

“Thank you so much for having us,” Pepper said, Morgan twirling around her fingers.

“Thank you,” Morgan said, surprisingly without any prompting.

“You’re welcome. Thank you, all, for coming.” May cleared her throat.

They started to walk away but May caught Peter’s arm.

“I’ll catch you up,” Peter said, and Pepper paused but then nodded, taking Morgan’s hand.

May pulled him into a tight hug. It felt like an assault on his memories; all the times she had held him when he was sad or happy or excited. The delicate floral of the perfume she always wore. The way her hands always held him: one hand on his back and the other on the back of his neck.

“Please come home.” Her whisper sent a shiver down his back. She gripped him harder and he tried not to release the tears in his eyes. “You seem better now, and I still don’t understand what happened, but if you don’t want to talk about it I won’t push you. But please come back.”

He pulled away and saw the defeated look on her face; it mirrored how she had looked the night he left.

“I’m sorry, I can’t.”

“I lived without you for five years, Peter. Five years of missing you every day. But this is...this is worse. You’re here, but I can’t reach you.”

You should have stayed dead.

Peter’s chest felt so tight breaths were hard to come.

“Don’t you love me anymore?”

He looked up then and stared into her watery eyes with intensity; squeezing her hands.

“Always.”

This seemed to push more tears from her eyes. Alfie ran over then and hugged his leg, with Kevin close behind.

“May; is he upsetting you?”

Peter scowled at his words; feeling a new level of hatred for this excuse for a man.

“He’s not...” But the tears continued to fall down her cheeks as Kevin wrapped an arm around her.

“I’m sorry. I better go...” Peter said but Alfie gripped his leg, seeming to understand his mother’s feelings. He gently unwrapped Alfie’s fingers from his leg and gave him a hug. “Sorry buddy, I’ll speak to you soon I promise,” he whispered.

Peter blocked out the sound of May and Alfie crying as he headed for the car. He hesitated at the door. He didn’t want to get in the car with Morgan and Pepper and either fall apart or pretend that he wasn’t. Not in front of Morgan.

He opened the door to the back to see Pepper.

“Pepper, I’m gonna start my rounds early since I’m already in Queens. Can you pass me my bag, please?” His throat squeaked and she looked at him, no doubt seeing the emotion in his eyes.

“Tony is expecting us for dinner...” She craned her neck out of the car, blocking Morgan’s view.

“I...I just need to be alone for a bit.”

He wasn’t sure what she was going to do as her piercing gaze hit him. She reached back and pulled his bag out.

“You’re not alone though, you know that right?” She said as she handed it to him.

He nodded, gave her a brief kiss to the cheek and was gone.

Pepper must have waited until they got home to tell Tony as he didn't get a call from him until an hour later. He'd suited up and sat on top of the tallest building he could find; letting tears fall where no one would ever see.

"Peter, Mr Stark is calling. Should I patch him through?"

Peter sighed. "Sure Karen."

Tony's face came up; his face trying not to show concern.

"You were joking about the ass kicking, weren't you?"

Peter couldn't help but smile at him. "You know Pepper didn't let me out of her sight once, right?"

Tony half smiled. "I don't doubt it."

There was a pause then.

"Pepper said you were upset at the end. Did he say something to you?"

"No; he barely acknowledged me." Peter let out a shaky breath. "May asked me to come home."

Another pause as he looked out over the city; thoughts bubbling like a brook within him.

"I hate hurting her. That is the last thing I ever wanted to do."

He waited for Tony to say all the things he'd said originally. That he should just tell her the truth; that she would get rid of Kevin and he could go back. None of what he would say would be wrong. But that didn't change the fact that he would have taken another husband from her and denied two children a father. He couldn't do that. He could live with a little pain now, for the greater good.

But Tony didn't say any of that.

"It's hard to see the people we love in pain." Tony's dark eyes stared at him intently as Peter read what he was saying between the lines.

Before it would have elated him, this love from Tony, but now it just made him feel afraid. Someone else to pass on the Parker Luck to; someone else to lose.

"I'm gonna get going on patrol," Peter said, swallowing.

"You know coming home might be a better idea. I have some new projects I wanted to run past you. We could see how DUM-E gets on making hot chocolate again."

"Thanks, but I want to do some good work here."

Please can I stop someone hurting today.

Peter saw Tony hesitate and stop himself saying something.

"Not too late though, yeah?"

"Ok, bye Tony."

"Bye kid."

Peter could feel the sweat pooling in his armpits. He had been put to work today by the good criminals of Queens. He'd stopped a few muggings and two car thefts; as well as some good old-fashioned community service work which had included helping a cat out of a tree, and helping some lost tourists who thought that they were in Manhattan when they really were not. He'd really had to use his Spanish then, well, with a little help from Google Translate.

He webbed his way up to a building; the air feeling cooler up here and everything calmer without the lights of the city blaring at him.

"Hey Karen, what else do you have for me?"

"You are out past your curfew, Peter."

"I'm not sure Aunt May has to worry about that anymore."

"Can I remind you that you have several messages from Mr Stark that you have yet to respond to?"

"Show me please, K."

The list of text messages came up inside his mask.

TS : Kid, you back for dinner?

TS : Saved you some Chow Mein before Happy ate it all. It's in the fridge.

TS: It's getting late now. What time will you be back?

***TS:** Kid? I can see you are still in the suit and your vitals are steady, so you are not dead, which is the only reason I'm not freaking out. Call me.*

The last message was from 15 minutes ago.

“Karen send a reply that says...”

Karen cut in sharply.

“Reports of a domestic disturbance two blocks away. NYPD have been alerted but are unable to respond at this time.”

“I’ll take a look – show me the way.”

He made it to the apartment building in seconds and crawled up the wall to the sound of the shouts.

He looked through the window. A woman was sat blood spurting out of her nose and down her chin.

“You fucking bitch, you’ve been sleeping around again,” The voice came from the back of a heavy set man, his fists curled.

He heard the woman mumble something placating that he couldn’t even hear.

“Daddy, please...” Peter heard the voice before a little girl came into view. She had dark, straggly hair and tears streaming down her cheeks. She was not much older than Morgan, but Peter had never seen an expression on Morgan’s face like the one on this girl’s; fear and recognition. As the man approached the cowering woman, she started to walk in front of her mother and Peter watched as the man smacked her across the face and she fell to the floor.

The next few minutes were a blur; he heard the crash as he threw himself through the glass; he felt shards cutting through the suit and into his skin. The next sensation was the feel of his fist on flesh over and over again.

“Spider-man, STOP!”

The scream came from the girl. Peter came into his head again and looked down; the man’s face was a mess; nose broken, blood everywhere, not moving. Peter stumbled back off the body – was it just a body now?

The girl and her mother were huddled together sobbing.

“Are you ok?” He went towards them, his hand outstretched, and the girl jumped back away from him.

His heart-thumping a mile a minute was suddenly in his throat. She was scared of him. He was meant to be the good guy. He looked down at the blood on his hands. This was all wrong. All wrong.

He backed away and pressed a finger to the guy’s neck trying not to look at the mess that he’d made of the man’s face. *Did I really do that?*

The man’s pulse was strong under his finger and his shoulders sagged in relief.

His voice shook as he spoke, “Karen call an ambulance and the Police.”

“Done. NYPD will arrive in approximately 2 minutes. Do you want me to forward the video of this intervention?”

“No, no, not right now.”

“Mr Stark is trying to get put through.”

“Don’t allow him Karen. Override.”

Peter knew he had to get out of here; before the Police arrived and before he had a full-blown panic attack.

Peter couldn't bear to look back at the little girl.

"I...I'm sorry," he said, before he climbed out of the window.

He started webbing away, his heart not going any slower, and his breaths becoming short.

"Peter, Mr Stark is trying again..."

"No!"

Peter webbed to the next building and skidding across the roof on his knees. He yanked the mask off and pools of vomit shot out of his mouth. When he finished, he took a moment to get to his feet; a shiver rippling through his body.

As soon as he put the mask back on Karen's voice came back with what seemed like an insistent tone.

"Mr Stark is going to initiate the 'Three Strikes and you're Out' Protocol if you don't respond now."

Peter took in a breath.

"He is trying to access my files from the last altercation."

"Override Karen, no. Hard override, do not show him the video. Tell him that I'm on my way back."

Peter gathered his energy and webbed his way back to the Tower. He webbed straight up to his room, hoping to avoid Tony for as long as possible.

Of course it wasn't going to go his way, he'd barely made it through the window before his door flew open, slamming into the wall behind.

Peter stumbled back; his breath still short.

"What the hell happened?" Tony's voice was sharp.

"I...uh..." What could he say? He'd fully freaked out. He'd hurt someone. He'd lost it.

"Peter!" Tony's snap brought him back to the room and he jerked his head up to look at his mentor. His face was full of anger; his eyes penetrating him. "Take the Goddamn mask off, for Christ's sake."

Peter pulled it off over his head, and a few pieces of glass fell to the ground.

"Shit, your face is cut, are you hurt?"

Tony stepped towards him and he stepped back, bumping against the windowsill as he did.

"I...I'm fine," Peter said, his tone stronger than he felt right now.

"I doubt that. What happened out there?"

Feeling stronger, Peter edged away from him and to the bathroom. A quick glance at his face showed it was littered with tiny specks of blood – but he could feel the cuts were closed. He pulled the tap on and put his shaking hands under; the water turning pink straight away. Someone else's blood draining away with the water. His stomach lurched and if there had been anything left in his stomach, he knew he would have lost it there and then.

"Peter, I'm going to need an answer from you," Tony's voice came from the doorway, cooler now.

Peter swallowed the bile and splashed some water on his face. He saw a darker patch by his elbow; there was more blood on the suit. He had to get it off. He pressed the button on his chest and the suit loosened. He scrambled out of it quickly.

His chest and arms were dotted with scratches, but they didn't matter now. He threw the suit on the edge of the bath before remembering that Tony was there. He was in the doorway, blocking any exit. Was that on purpose? He looked at the floor again. How could he explain what the hell just happened when he wasn't really sure?

A hand touched his shoulder and he jumped.

Tony stepped back like he'd been burned, and his voice morphed into a soft lilt. "Easy buddy, you're ok."

Peter looked at him then; Tony was looking at him like he was a broken toy. Maybe he was; but pity was not what he needed right now. Not what he deserved.

"Yeah, I'm fine," he snapped, slipping past Tony now he'd left a space in the doorway. "It was just a domestic disturbance."

"Really, cos it looked to me like you just beat some guy half to death?"

Peter felt a flash of panic before he pushed it away and latched on to a different emotion; something to shut out the noise in his ears.

"You overrode Karen? You've got no right."

"Actually, yeah, my suit so I can do whatever the hell I want."

"Why are you asking me about it if you already saw?" Peter snapped. "You got the information you wanted."

"You flipped out. That's why. So, I want to know why."

“I...”

“The guy hit the kid. Was that what it was? It made you think of Kevin.”

Peter felt the noise in his ears grow; that wasn't why, was it? The guy was hurting a little girl. He – Spider-man – had to stop him, same as anything else. But no, Tony had to see it as a move from a screwed-up Peter Parker.

“Fuck you.”

Tony looked shocked for a second. “You're upset so I'm going to let that slide. But if you don't start talking about this shit you've been through, maybe next time you will really hurt someone. Then how are you going to feel? You don't want that on your conscience.”

He could have killed someone. He would have been a murderer. Maybe he would get a cell next to Toomes to live out the rest of his days.

“You shouldn't go out Spider-manning if you're emotionally compromised.”

Peter's blood suddenly felt like it was running cool and he looked Tony in the eye.

“This from the man that got drunk in his Iron Man suit and blew holes in his house.”

Tony's face hardened. “This isn't about me. But take me as a cautionary tale, if it gets you to see sense. You shouldn't try to be a hero if you aren't yourself.”

“You're taking the suit away?”

Tony was the one who looked cornered now.

“I never said that.” Tony swallowed. “I wouldn't do that again.”

“But you don’t trust me with it.”

Tony hesitated and that was all it took.

Peter stormed back into the bathroom and grabbed the suit off the floor. He shoved it into Tony’s hands, a bewildered expression on his face, before going back to the bathroom and slamming the door.

“FRIDAY, lock the door.”

“Yes, Peter.”

Chapter End Notes

I’m throwing this at you - go on, take it. I can’t keep re-writing it.

As always, I welcome your musings with glee

Chapter 24

Tony

“Coffee, my sweet?” Tony asked as Pepper’s arms curled around his waist. He pulled his cup away from the machine and stirred in some sugar.

“Mmm, yes please,” she purred into his neck. “Decaf.”

“Don’t swear in front of the children, Pep.”

She kissed his cheek and took her bowl of fruit to sit at the island. Tony watched as Morgan feverishly coloured in something that looked like a half banana, half giraffe hybrid. He secretly hoped she was headed for a STEM career as an art one was looking dicey.

Peter was hunched over his cereal, taking a bite every now and then, whilst looking at his phone. Music was leaking from the earphones in his ears. Tony imagined, judging by Peter’s demeanour over the last two days, that it was something angsty and emo.

Tony sighed. At least Peter’s presence this morning was an improvement from yesterday, when he’d left for school before anyone was up and had stayed out at Ned’s - texting *Pepper* to let her know – before coming home and going straight to his room. Tony had knocked on the door, but the kid pretended to be asleep. Tony had let it lie; he didn’t know what the hell to say after the shit show that was Sunday night anyway. Pepper had given him one of her judging looks when he had come back five minutes later, apparently knowing that wouldn’t have been enough time to sort stuff out.

The guy that Peter had gone to town on was going to be ok – well, as ok as you can be with a broken nose and cracked jaw. He would be arrested when he was out of the hospital. Tony had made sure that the family would be helped by the proper authorities. He also knew that Peter had checked into what had happened through FRIDAY: he hoped knowing that the guy was going to be ok, and the family helped, would ease the guilt Tony knew he was feeling.

“Peter?” Pepper lay a hand on his arm and he looked up sharply. Tony could see the bags under his eyes and made a mental note to ask FRIDAY how much sleep he was getting. “Do you mind

taking your earphones out at the table?”

Peter pulled them out straight away. “Yes, ma’am.”

Pepper looked at Tony then as Peter looked back down at this lap and mouthed ‘ma’am’ with a questioning look.

‘I’d like for the three of us to sit down and talk later tonight. 8pm in the lounge, ok?”

Peter seemed to hunch in at that. “Yes, Miss Potts.”

Before Pepper could correct him with her first name, the elevator opened and Happy came out.

“Let’s go, Rugrats,”

Tony almost dropped his coffee as Peter bolted out of the seat.

“I’ll meet you in the car,” he mumbled to Happy before getting in the elevator.

Happy looked over at them bemused. “Something I said?”

Peter

The calculations weren’t hard, but they sure weren’t adding up. There was no way he could survive on the money he had left for any more than a few weeks. If Tony let him keep the internship, then he might be ok, but that still left the issue of where he would sleep each night – what he had would only really cover basic food.

“Ow,” he gasped as MJ kicked him. He looked over at her raised eyebrow as she nodded towards the teacher.

“Yes Mr Parker, over here.” Mrs Walsh looked pissed. “I said what is the calculation for that?”

Peter look up at the board and then back down at his sheet of working outs. He doubted she was talking about his living expenses.

“I don’t know, sorry.” Peter felt the heat of his embarrassment start to rise up his neck.

“If I catch you not paying attention again Peter, then you will find yourself in detention.”

“Sorry,” he repeated, slumping into his chair as the teacher took her gaze off of him and continued the class.

He forced himself to keep up with what she was saying before the bell for lunch finally rang. He gathered his bag quickly and darted out of the classroom in case Mrs Walsh had the idea to talk to him about his lack of attention.

He noticed MJ fall into step with him.

“Peter, stop,” MJ said sharply. He came to a stop, the busy hall going on around them.

“Come here,” she pulled him by the sleeve into an empty music room.

“What’s going on?” She said as soon as the door closed behind him.

“W-what do you mean?” Peter pulled his bag in a little tighter on his shoulders.

“You’ve been walking around on autopilot for the last two days.” Peter opened his mouth to say something. “Don’t deny it. Ned’s noticed too and we both know how unobservant he is.”

Shit, Peter had been trying to act normal even though his brain was constantly racing about Sunday night. He wasn't trying to withhold anything from them. It's just that it was Ned's Dad's anniversary tomorrow and he knew how upset he was; he didn't want to add to the load.

"I- I really messed up, MJ," he slumped back against the wall, banging his head against the wall and hating how his voice shook.

"Like, *'oh no I got an A-* 'or serious, real-life shit?"

"The last one," Peter felt tears prick his eyes as he remembered the look of fear on the little girl's face when he stepped towards her. "And then I had a fight with Mr Stark – I basically told him to fuck off - and now they want to talk to me tonight. I think they're gonna kick me out, and I get why they would, but I'm not sure how I can survive and I can't do foster care, I can't...so maybe I should just go back to May's..."

"Dude, breath." MJ's voice was firm but gentle and he felt the weight of her hand on his shoulder and the familiar scent of her perfume.

"You seem to be skirting around whatever happened in the first place so I will too, but as for the rest of it, you are really reaching, Peter. They are probably worried because telling someone to fuck off is so not you."

Peter felt himself relax slightly. "It was more of a 'fuck you' moment..."

MJ gave him her quirky half smile that was all hers. "Well, that seems tamer."

She took her hand off of his shoulder then, leaning against the wall next to him, but her arm pressed up against his.

"As for going back to May's, if that asshole is still there, then that is a 100%, class A, no. People like that never change; even if they say they will."

Peter didn't know what to say to that.

“It will be ok, loser. Just maybe actually talk to them about all the shit you’ve been through. It seems like they genuinely care.”

Peter didn’t know if he could do that, so he didn’t say anything.

“I wish I’d been there to see you tell Tony Stark *‘fuck you’*. I bet his face would’ve been a funny picture to draw.”

A smile pulled from the depths of him and he thanked Thor that he had such good friends.

Tony

Peter was already in the living room when Tony came in for their meeting. He looked up at him; his brown eyes looking even more Bambi-ish than usual.

“Um, hey,” Peter said, wetting his lips with his tongue.

“Hey,” Tony said, unused to feeling nervous around the kid.

Both of their phones beeped then.

Pepper: *Sorry boys, I’m not going to be able to get back until later. Start without me.*

That woman was crafty.

Peter looked up at him, clearly coming to the same conclusion. “Subtle.”

A laugh erupted from Tony’s chest; easing the tension inside of him and by the looks of it, in Peter too.

“She is a master manipulator that woman,” Tony said, coming over and sitting in the armchair opposite where Peter sat perched on the couch. “Don’t let the angelic looks fool you.”

There was a silence for a moment.

“So, I guess she thinks the two of us should talk.”

Peter looked down at the floor then. “I’m sorry I told you to fuck off.”

“Did you? I don’t remember that.” Tony raised a quizzical eyebrow at him, but Peter didn’t smile this time. “That wasn’t the thing I was troubled about.”

Peter seemed to hunch in on himself. “I know.”

There was a flicker of silence again.

“The little girl reminded me of Morgan.”

Oh. *Oh.*

“He was hurting her, and she was tiny. Like I’m not stupid, I know shit like that happens in the world. But when I saw him hit her...” Peter didn’t look up and Tony could see his shoulders shaking.

“You lost control.” Tony stated and Peter didn’t disagree. “Do you want to talk about it?”

Peter shook his head. 'I just want to forget it happened.'

"Are we talking about Sunday night, or Kevin?"

There was that silence again. Peter's gaze was solidly at his feet.

"I'm told talking about things helps. So maybe you should do that. With me. Or with someone else, if that would be easier..."

Peter's head shot up. "You want me to see a therapist?"

Tony was surprised at the hostility to the idea so clearly shown on Peter's face.

"Is that so outlandish?"

"Really, you and the rest of the Avengers talk to shrinks about things that go wrong on the job? Likely."

Tony didn't like the almost sneer on the boy's face. He was so desperate to be treated as an equal on the team, that he hated any thought that he might be treated differently. Tony could see he assumed it was because of his age, not his experiences.

"Plenty of the team have talked to professional people. Besides, it's not really Avengers stuff, that I think you should be talking about."

"This is one of those '*do as I say, don't do as I do*' things, right?" The kid deflected and looked, well, pissed.

"Well, I wasn't the one who broke a man's jaw on Sunday."

"You...you've killed people. You're hardly one to talk."

Tony bit hard on his lip to not tear into the kid. He took a steadying breath.

“Yeah, I have. And I don’t want that for you.” Tony’s jaw tensed as he ground the words out. “I want better.”

Peter looked up then, his eyes clouded in pain, and Tony remembered using similar words all those years ago after the ferry disaster.

Tony jerked back as Peter let out an eerie laugh.

“Better? I can’t be that for you. I can’t be that for anyone. I can’t even...” Tony watched the kid think for a second; a myriad of emotions passing through his face. “I can’t do this, right now.” He jumped out of his seat.

“You can’t keep avoiding this, Peter,” Tony called. But he got no reply; just the retreating figure of the Spiderling.

Peter

Peter spotted Ned from the back of the cafeteria. His head was down and focussed on his lunch; to anyone else it would seem normal. But Peter knows Ned; can see from here the way he is shovelling food in in a trance. He’d noticed that Ned’s eating had been increasing. He was always someone who turned to food during bad times but since they came back – since his Dad had been gone – it had gotten worse. A few months of this meant that the weight gain had become noticeable. His shirts were tight in places and he seemed more out of breath climbing stairs. Peter hated to see his friend hurting so much.

He grabbed some food and jogged over to join him.

“Hey Ned,” he said, sliding in next to him, “how was History?”

“Yeah, it was ok.” Ned’s face was emotionless as he looked at him.

“Hey Dorks,” MJ’s words were the same as usual, but they had a softer quality to them today. She knew what day it was for Ned.

MJ told them a little about the book she was currently reading while they finished their lunch— a novel about existentialism. If she thought that would cheer anyone up, she had misread the room.

Ned’s phone lit up and Peter could see a photo of his Mom pop up.

“I’m just going to take this,” Ned grabbed his bag and shuffled off out into the corridor. Peter watched him nervously as he disappeared through the doors.

“He is finding today really hard, isn’t he?” MJ commented and Peter saw she was looking at the now closed door too.

“First anniversary’s often are,” Peter said, not wanting to touch his own memories on the matter, but still feeling a flush of the emotions. He was deliberately trying to keep that box locked down; as well as everything that was exposed from yesterday’s conversation with Tony. Today his job was to look after Ned, not deal with his own stuff.

“Especially when you never got the chance to say goodbye,” MJ murmured.

She looked at him then; her dark eyes always so good at trapping his own. “How are you doing?”

“Um, yeah. It’s tough. I-I just want to help him. I’m not used to being on the other side of it.” Peter pushed out. He could rarely deflect with her – whether that was because he knew she had no tolerance for bullshit, or some sort of superpower she possessed.

“Look, I think I’m going to go and check on him. I’m not sure coming in today was the best move.” Peter stood up and was surprised that he was relieved when he saw she was coming too; falling into pace with him as they walked out of the cafeteria.

As soon as they got out of the doors, they saw him at the end of the corridor, hunched over. Peter

got to him first.

“Ned,” Peter watched the tears fall down his best friend’s face and his heart squeezed a little too tightly. He wrapped his arms around him and felt Ned’s tears starting to leak through the fabric on his t-shirt. MJ arrived and she placed a hand on Ned’s shaking shoulder. After a moment, Ned pulled back, but Peter kept an arm around his waist.

“Is this what it is like from now on? Life just goes on and he is just not there. How did you get through this?” Ned turned to Peter.

“I had you and May; just like you have your family and me,” Peter said firmly.

“Us,” MJ said warmly, squeezing his shoulder.

Ned frowned at him. “But I didn’t do anything.”

Peter thought back to when Ben died. He and Ned had just carried on as normal – done the usual things they had done – hung out, Lego, movies. The normalcy had been everything.

“You were just there. That helped,” Peter said. “But we can talk about it too. I know you are good about talking about your emotions. I never was.”

“I think you meant that present tense – I never am.” MJ cut in and it caused Ned to smile, through the tears.

“Yeah, you really suck at that,” Ned said with a smile and MJ nodded along.

Peter pretended to be shocked and they both laughed.

“Here,” MJ dove into her bag and got out a tissue for Ned. She always seemed to be much more prepared for everyday life than he was.

“Aww, Parker and his boyfriend cuddling up in the hall.” Flash’s irritating voice broke through.

He was stood flanked by his two new cronies, who he no doubt had paid to be his friends. He'd always been a bully but since being blipped he was a lot more physical with people; no doubt feeling backed up by his muscle-bound buddies.

"Not today Flash," Peter said loudly, his chest starting to tighten.

"Why? Is it your Dead Dad's support group meeting?" Flash said with a glint in his eye.

Peter's fist clenched and he heard MJ spit out: "You're vile."

"I said not today Flash, leave us alone." Peter half stepped in front of Ned.

Flash gave him a look which said he was inconsequential before turning to MJ. "You should really watch out. Ned has already caught the Parker curse. You might be next. How many parental figures are you down so far, Parker?"

An image of Ben came to mind and Peter pushed it away as his breath started to shorten. He really did feel cursed.

Ned stepped forward then; his own fists tight with rage.

"You're just jealous because you've never had a real friend in your life."

Flash's face filled with anger – the words had hit – and he pushed Ned, hard. "Fuck off, Fatty."

As soon as Flash touched Ned, it was like a switch had been flicked. Peter wrapped his hand around Flash's throat and pushed him back, hard and fast, slamming into the lockers behind.

Flash's eyes bulged in surprise before Peter slammed his fist into Flash's face, only hearing Ned call his name reminding him to pull his strength out at the last second. He saw Flash's face snap to the side and then remembered the man from Sunday - how he'd left him bloodied, with a broken nose and cracked jaw. He let go and staggered back – he couldn't lose control like that again. Two sets of arms pulled him further back from Flash. The cronies held him back and he pretended to struggle before Flash punched him full in the face and twice in the stomach before a teacher arrived to break it up.

Peter had been sat out in the hallway with an ice pack for over an hour. The principal had already told him that they were trying to get hold of one of his guardians. He had no idea if May was working today – he didn't know her current schedule. This was not really a conversation he wanted to have with her – he knew she would try to get him to talk about why he left. Then again, the idea of Tony picking him up after their argument about Spider-man was going to be hell too. He would no doubt use this whole incident to lay credence to his belief that Peter should take a break from Spider-man – have therapy. Ugh. He was going to be insufferable. Peter was weighing up the pros and cons for each one when Kevin came walking in.

Peter didn't have time to fully freak out before they were being called into Principal Morita's office. Peter sat in the chair next to Kevin, his eyes firmly settled on the desk in front: anywhere but the man next to him.

"I'm sorry to have to call you into school Mr Hayes," Principal Morita began. "We tried to contact your wife..."

"She couldn't leave her shift at the hospital. She asked me to come and represent the family."

It hadn't occurred to him that Kevin would be down as his secondary contact. For the year before the blip, it had been Tony. May had added him after Peter had a bad sensory overload and she couldn't get away. It had never been needed again. May must have changed it when they re-registered at school this year.

Peter registered Kevin sitting back in his chair. "So, what did he do?"

"I'm afraid he was involved in a fight with three other boys. He was reported as the first person to raise a fist."

"Flash said horrible things to Ned on his Dad's anniversary and then pushed him." Peter couldn't help interrupt.

"Be quiet," Kevin said sternly.

Principal Morita did not look unsympathetic but followed on with a question: "Regardless, you

threw the first punch. Yes?”

Peter reluctantly nodded. Principal Morita sat back with a sigh. “You’re a good kid Peter, a great student, but my hands are tied. You’ll be suspended for two days and have detention for a week when you return.”

Peter sat back. This was not going to look good on his permanent record. What if it stopped him getting into MIT? Oh God. He shouldn’t have let Flash get a rise out of him – Lord knows he had controlled himself multiple times in the past. Was this who he was now? Someone who can’t stop themselves hurting people. Was he going to become like Kevin?

“That only seems fair,” Kevin said, “can I take him home now?”

Principal Morita nodded as they both stood up and shook hands. Peter trudged out behind Kevin: shooting Principal Morita a sorrowful look as he went past him.

“Get a move on,” Kevin growled under his breath as soon as they got out of the offices.

Peter tried to walk behind Kevin, but Kevin gave him a push in the back ensuring he was in front of him as they headed out of the school building. Peter’s stomach churned being so close to the man.

There was no one else around – school didn’t let out for another 30 minutes. Peter started to head in the direction of the subway. He might as well go back to the Tower and face the music.

“Hey!” Kevin hurried in front of him, blocking his path, “Where do you think you’re going?”

Peter tried to step around him, but Kevin grabbed his upper arm tightly.

“Let go of me,” he said forcefully but the familiar trickle of fear started to creep up his neck at being so close to Kevin.

Kevin didn’t seem to care what he said as he started to drag Peter in the opposite direction. “We’re going home.”

Peter pulled himself out of his grip. "I don't live with you anymore."

Kevin turned back to him and gave him a small push. "And look what happens. You weren't getting into trouble at school on my watch, were you?"

"No, life was just great then," Peter said, so tired of this dance.

Kevin pushed him backwards several times then until they were at the mouth of an alley filled with dumpsters that ran alongside the school.

"This little vacation ends now; you're gonna come home with me and apologise to your Aunt, whose heart you broke."

Peter shook his head and that seemed to enrage Kevin further. He pushed Peter hard, so his body slammed against the metal dumpster; the noise echoing down the alley like the pain echoed through his back. Kevin's hand gripped his throat now, keeping him there.

"I don't understand. I left. You got what you wanted," Peter gasped through his grip.

"No, I wish that you'd never come back."

"So do I."

"Yeah well, May wants you back," Kevin said, his face then flashing with doubt and his grip loosening a bit. "I'll...I'll leave you...alone...if you do."

Peter was so confused. He was saying that if he came back that he wouldn't hit him anymore?

He didn't have a chance to think anymore when Kevin's hand was suddenly wrenched off his neck and he stumbled back. It was Happy; his face angrier than Peter had ever seen.

“What the hell are you doing pushing him about?” Happy squared up to Kevin again and gave him a bigger push this time which unbalanced him, and he landed on the floor. Kevin scrambled up and head towards Happy. Peter lurched out of his haze and got himself in-between the two bigger men; using his strength to separate them.

Happy went to step forward but Peter got in front of him and pushed him back.

“Happy, stop,” Peter yelled. Happy tried to get through him again but Peter stopped him. He couldn’t let Happy get hurt. “Happy, let’s just go.”

Happy took his eyes off Kevin for a second and down at Peter’s; his body relaxing slightly as it did.

“You come home, or I’ll tell her about Ben, do you hear?” Kevin called as they backed away. Peter flinched, but kept dragging Happy back to the car; the driver glaring at Kevin the whole way.

As soon as they got into the car, Happy turned around in his seat to look at Peter.

“What the hell was that, Peter?”

Peter shrank back in the seat; his head starting to pound.

“Why were you letting him push you around like that? And what was he talking about Ben?”

“Happy, enough! I don’t want to talk about it,” Peter erupted before ducking his head in guilt at shouting at the man who’d just tried to help him. “Sorry, can we just go?”

He could tell from the set of Happy’s shoulders that he was not pleased, but he manoeuvred the car on to the road and didn’t say another word during the half hour journey to the Tower.

Happy was hot on his heels as he got out of the car following him into the elevator. He didn’t always come up and Peter could guess as to why he was today. Peter bundled himself up in the corner of the elevator and tried to push out the events of today. Happy still didn’t talk to him on the ride up to the Penthouse, but Peter could feel his eyes on him.

Peter burst out of the elevator to head to his bedroom but was interjected by a furious looking Tony.

“You got suspended from school?!” Tony shouted – louder than he’d ever shouted before and Peter flinched. Tony continued before he could even speak. “What the hell were you thinking?”

“Tony,” Happy’s voice was telling him to calm down but he carried on regardless.

“No, right, you weren’t thinking. Just like the other night.”

That pissed Peter off. “That was a totally different situation.”

“Doesn’t look that way to me.”

“Flash said some awful stuff and then he pushed Ned,” Peter said, his jaw clenching.

Tony didn’t even seem to listen. “Regardless of how angry you are about everything, *you*, of all people, can’t go around punching people.”

“He deserved it,” Peter noticed Tony’s eyebrow raise. “Besides, I can control my strength.”

“But apparently not yourself,” Tony bit back. “If you can’t be trusted to be in control at school, then you will have to be, I don’t know, home-schooled or something.”

“You can’t be home-schooled when you don’t have a home,” Peter muttered as he started to walk past Tony, his heart ricocheting in his chest.

“No, you wait.” Peter stopped as Tony came to stand in front of him; his shoulders tensed and his gaze poker hot. For a moment he felt a flash of panic; Tony’s stance too similar to Kevin before he lashed out. “You don’t think this is your home, huh? Cos you sure mope and angst around the place like it is.”

“Like you gave me any choice but to be here,” Peter snapped. “I’d forgotten how much you like to put people under house arrest.”

The flash across Tony’s face showed a quick change from shock to hurt to anger.

“I’ll be sure to give you bread and water only during your suspension, oh and for the next, I don’t know, *month*, when you are grounded from Ned, from after school activities, from Spider-Man.”

“Yeah, well maybe I’ll just go back to May’s.”

Tony’s look darkened. “I’m starting to think that you liked getting the shit kicked out of you.”

“Tony,” Happy broke in then, ignoring Tony’s annoyed look when he didn’t stop talking. “The guy was there today – Kevin – at the school.”

“What?! Why?” Tony’s face showed alarm.

“It’s no big deal. May must have put him down as secondary contact and when they couldn’t reach her, they got him. Can I go now?” Peter was itching to get away from wherever this conversation was going to go next.

“The guy was pushing him –” Happy continued.

“- it was no big deal.” Peter interrupted but Happy continued giving him an ‘*are-you-crazy?*’ look.

“He had you by the throat, Peter.”

“He what?!” Tony looked both horrified and angry.

“It was no bi-“

Tony put his finger up. “I swear to god you better not finish that sentence. Let me guess, you had every intention of *not* telling me about this altercation. Even after everything.”

“Nothing bad actually happened. Just like you, he was pissed that I got suspended.”

“Yeah, a hand around your throat is nothing. Do you even hear yourself?”

“He said that he’d leave off me if I went back.” Peter didn’t know he was going to say that before it shot out of his mouth.

Tony stilled. “Is that right?” His voice was cold and dangerous.

“Yeah, so,” Peter stood up straighter to seem more confident. “I’m going to go back.”

“And he said that while his hand was wrapped around your throat, right?”

Peter hesitated.

“Come on, Parker. I thought you were smarter than this. He’s manipulating you.”

“What do you care? I’ll be safe; May will be happy. You won’t have to deal with an angsty teenager in your space anymore.” Peter spat out. “You don’t have to pretend to be my Dad anymore.”

“I am not pretending!”

Peter didn’t have time to take in how he felt about those words, but crossed his arms against his chest to stop them shaking.

“And you are categorically not going back there.”

“You don’t get to decide for me.”

“Yes, yes I do. I’m the adult. I’m in charge. This is the end of it. I’ve put up with your bullshit about this and I’m done. I’m telling May everything.”

“If you do, I’ll hate you.” Peter shouted; the fear of her finding out, of Kevin telling her about Ben surging through him.

“Unlike now?” Tony snapped; his voice louder still as he stepped even closer, inches from his face. “You’re being a moron if you think I care what you want right now. Hate me all you want.”

“Daddy!” Morgan’s scream echoed off the walls as she ran in-between them, pushing Tony away from him; her arm out in front of her like she was Iron Man. “Stop shouting at my brother!”

Tony’s whole body went slack and his eyes widened. Peter took his chance to get the hell out of there and into his room.

Tony

A burst of recognition sent a shock wave through his body and he couldn’t speak as he watched the retreating figure of Peter.

Morgan’s eyes were full of anger and tears, her arm still outstretched in the pose that screamed ‘stop’: *protect*. He strangled back his own tears as swooped her up in his arms.

“I’m sorry baby. I’m so, so sorry.”

She wriggled away from him. “Why are you being so mean? Why are you shouting at him?”

Tony didn't know what to say to that.

"I shouldn't have been." He said the words more to himself than her and he felt his chest start to constrict.

"Tony, you can't square up to him like that. Not after..." Happy let the words hang and they dug like a knife into Tony's gut.

"Yeah," he breathed out; fighting the tendrils of panic that were starting to take hold.

"Happy, can you...?" He handed Morgan off to the driver, who pulled her into a hug.

Tony swallowed as he walked over to Peter's room. He hesitated. What was he going to say? He'd just done a Howard Stark special. Shouted, got angry, not listened, blamed the victim. He couldn't go in now – what if he cocked it up further?

His breathing shortened again as he made it into the elevator and down to his lab where he stumbled onto the floor.

"Boss, you seem to be experiencing an anxiety attack. Should I call for assistance?"

"No," Tony said, trying to suck breath in. He remembered his grounding. *The tile under my fingers, the hum of DUM-E's motor, the smell of motor oil.*

Once he had calmed his breathing, he just lay on the floor for a long time, replaying the conversations of the last few days over and over in his mind. How had he let it get to this?

"Boss, Mr Hogan has asked if he should organise dinner."

"Tell him yes. But I won't be up. Ask him to stay with the kids."

He pulled himself off the ground now and on to his feet, trying to ignore the shaky feeling left in his body from the attack. He found himself going over to the wall where Pepper had mounted family photos from through the years. They had brought them from the cabin and Pepper had thought it was funny to put them up in here so he could ‘*remember what we look like*’ when he got deep into his work.

Pepper had added a few more since they moved back to the city. His eyes were immediately drawn to one she had taken of him and Peter, both of their faces crinkled in laughter looking at something out of shot. It was a great picture – both of them so relaxed and happy.

“FRIDAY, what is Peter doing?”

“He is in his room, sitting on the floor.”

“Show me.”

A hologram video feed popped up. Peter was squashed into the far corner of the room, his legs drawn up and his head hanging forward. Tony watched as he shifted his weight for a second, pulling his sleeve across his face.

“Is he...is he crying?” Tony asked, hearing his voice crack.

“Yes, Boss. Periodically since he entered his room.”

I did that.

Tony walked through the hologram and grabbed a framed photo of his own father; he hurled it across the room and watched as it smashed against the wall.

Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tony

Tony was only alerted to Pepper's presence by the fact that his music stopped abruptly.

He looked up and saw his wife, her suit still managing to look unwrinkled despite the fact that she'd spent a long day in meetings. Her face however was not without wrinkles as she stepped over the broken glass.

"DUM-E, why haven't you cleared that up?" he snapped.

The robot made a quirky reply to Tony that he was sure sounded like disdain.

She made it over to him and slid under his arm to give him a kiss on the cheek.

"What are you working on here?"

Tony knew that she only really asked him about his work when she was building up to ask him about something he wouldn't want to talk about.

He let out a sigh. "I'm just working on Peter's birthday present. It seemed like the best time to do it, since there is a snowball's chance in hell that he will come down here tonight." Tony wiped the oil from his hands with a rag and threw it onto the table.

Peppers eyes crinkled. "Happy said you two had a fight."

Tony let out a laugh. “That’s the understatement of the year. I didn’t realise Happy was that diplomatic. I’ll remember that next time I’m on the phone with Ross.”

DUM-E came over then with the photo of Howard in his hands. He held it out and Tony ignored him. Pepper reached out and took it from his claws.

Tony glanced at it and away. “Oh yeah, it was right out of the Howard Stark playbook alright. I didn’t even realise I was right up in his face. It took Morgan coming out and telling me to ‘*stop shouting at her brother*’ for me to stop.”

He saw Pepper cringe at that. “What happened today? Morgan was there so Happy just said there was some trouble at school.”

“He got suspended for fighting – apparently threw the first punch.”

“Peter? Our Peter?” Her eyes widened.

Tony nodded. “And this after he flipped out on that guy he caught hitting his kid.”

Pepper sighed. “Well, that was kind of understandable.”

“But you know what he is like, he never wants to talk about it. He won’t talk about that; he won’t talk about Kevin. Like he thinks he just has to deal with all this shit alone.”

“Yeah, no, I’ve *no* experience living with someone like that.” Pepper gave him a pointed look. “I’m honestly surprised you aren’t biologically related.”

Tony didn’t bother addressing that. He didn’t need reminding: his own shortcomings were front and centre today.

“Kevin picked him up from school. Happy caught him with his hand around Peter’s throat.” Pepper’s face paled as Tony continued. “He wasn’t even going to mention it Pep, but then he says

Kevin said he will stop hitting him if he agrees to come home and that he is actually considering it.”

Pepper crossed her arms around herself. “Like hell he is.”

“Well, that was my reaction and, well, it spiralled from there.” Tony felt his headache deepened and he rubbed his fingers into the grooves of his forehead.

“I never wanted to be like him,” Tony said after a moment.

Pepper wrapped her arms around him again.

“Granted you made some mistakes today. We all do; we’re not perfect. But please; you’re a wonderful father, Tony. Don’t ever doubt that.”

“I just wish Peter would let me be that for him.” A soft kiss hit his forehead and he leant into it; Pepper’s heartbeat steady against his head.

“Boss, May Parker is requesting a video call.”

Pepper looked at him wearily. He ran a hand through his hair and pressed the button.

May’s face came onto screen. She looked shattered – dark circles under her eyes.

“He isn’t answering his phone or replying to my texts. He *pushed* Kevin, refused to come back to talk about what happened at school. I don’t care what is happening outside, he doesn’t get to start fights at school – *get suspended* - and then not speak to me. I’m still his guardian, for Christ’s sake.”

“Hello to you too, May.”

“Tony, don’t joke with me now. This is serious. This can’t go on any longer. He needs to come home. NOW.”

“May...he won’t go for that...”

“I DON’T CARE WHAT HE WANTS.” He could see her chest pumping; her body tight. Tony couldn’t help but cringe as he heard some of his own words out of her mouth. Was this what he’d looked like with the kid earlier?

“We understand how hard this must be for you May...” Pepper began, trying to deescalate the situation.

“Do you? How can you possibly....”. May seemed to draw in a breath. “How could you possibly imagine what it’s like to lose him twice?”

There was a shared silence and they watched as tears ran down May’s face.

“Why is he doing this, Tony?” Her brown eyes, full of tears met his and he felt it – every inch of the pain she was feeling. He remembers it – the hollowness of a world without Peter. He was so close to just blurting it out; to ending her confusion. Pepper’s nails dug into his leg, a reminder. He let out a shuddered breath.

“I don’t understand it either.” And that was the truth – he didn’t. He didn’t get why Peter couldn’t be selfish for once. He had spent most of his 20s and 30s being just that.

May let out a huff of breath and buried her face in her hands. There was a pause and he hoped that she was calming down.

“Look May, this may seem an odd time to ask this, but can you put one of us down as an emergency contact at school. He was really shook up when Kevin tried to force him to go back and I just want to avoid a repeat of that. We need to just not push him right now and hopefully he will come round.”

May’s face had changed when she looked up now, but he wasn’t sure what her expression was conveying.

“You would want to be his legal guardian?”

Tony frowned. “Well, sure we would do that if needed, but that’s not what I meant. I mean for emergency purposes, like we did before the Blip for if he has sensory overload aga -“

“You’re trying to steal my son.” May’s mouth was hung open slightly and she was looking at them like she was seeing them for the first time.

“What?” Pepper sat up at the same time as him.

“You are trying to take him away from me.”

“May, we would never –“ Pepper began.

“How can I have been so stupid?” Her image moved around like she was pacing. “This was your plan all along. Even back when you came to the apartment to take him to Germany.”

“May...”

“You knew about his powers; you knew how fucking smart he was and you wanted it for yourself. You’ve got your heir now. You don’t need him. You can’t *have* him.”

Before either of them could respond to that, May continued, her hand gripping into her hair in a mannerism that was oh so like Peter’s.

“I’m such an idiot. Expect a call from the Police to pick him up. I don’t care how rich you are, or what a hero you think you are, you can’t take my son.”

The panic felt like ice in his veins and he could hear it in his rushed-out words. “He’ll run. May, please, he will. And then we might never see him again. Any of us.”

Her eyes focussed again. “He...he wouldn’t.”

“The day he left yours. I had to track him down. He didn’t want to come with me. I had to threaten him with the suit, just to get him to come here.”

Her brow furrowed as he took in this information: he could tell she hadn’t expected that.

“We all just want what is best for him, right?” He said after a pause.

Silent tears streamed down her face. “Always.”

The screen went blank.

—

Pepper had gone to sort Morgan out after their talk and after the shouting match with May. Well, he couldn’t call it a shouting match when she had shouted and they had just floundered. He had no idea if there was about to be a knock on the door from the Police. What would he do if there was? Tell them the truth and have Peter hate him for life? Hand him over? Blast them and then the four of them run away to a private island somewhere? Could this week get to be any more of a disaster when it was only Wednesday. He tried to put aside all thoughts of May as he blotted that out in his usual way – in the lab. He’d continued working on Peter’s present, whilst working on what the hell he was going to say to him about today.

It was past 9 o’clock when he finally got the courage up to go upstairs. ‘Sorry’ wasn’t really going to cut it as he remembered some of the things that he’d said. God, had he really called him a moron; had he really said that he liked to get the shit kicked out of him? And threatened to tell May, the one thing he didn’t want. He shivered as he thought of it. It didn’t matter what Peter had said, though some of it had badly stung. Peter was vulnerable right now and he was supposed to be the adult and all he’d done was pour gasoline over everything and set it on fire.

The elevator seemed to move faster than he wanted as it opened up at the penthouse. His heart felt fully in his throat as he reached the door. He knocked gently but there was no answer.

“FRIDAY, is Peter in his room?”

“Yes Boss, he appears to be sleeping.”

Was it that old tactic of pretending to be asleep again? Tony resolved himself and knocked gently on the door, waiting a beat before opening it up.

Sure enough, the kid was sprawled on the bed, still in his clothes. As Tony crossed over to the bed, he could see the teenagers chest rise and fall slowly. What teenager was asleep at 9pm? But then he could see the tear tracks still on his cheeks; maybe the emotional exhaustion of the day had wiped him out. Tony watched him for a moment; wanting badly to reach out and touch him. He didn't want to risk waking him up; he pulled the comforter from the end of the bed so that it covered him, and Peter snuggled into it, a curl of hair hanging over his face.

It could wait until tomorrow.

—

Happy was sitting at the kitchen island, a cup of coffee in his hand and a newspaper in the other.

“I didn't realise they still printed out newspapers,” Tony commented as he walked over to the coffee machine, lifting a mug from the side. “Why don't you just read online like a normal person?”

Happy made a hmpf sound but didn't bite, just folded his paper up and laid it down pointedly.

“Why are you still here anyway?”

“I was waiting for you to leave your man cave so I could talk to you.”

“If it is about another raise, you've judged my mood all wrong.” Tony filled his cup of coffee and added two heaped spoonfuls of sugar since Pepper wasn't here to chastise. He turned to look at his old friend.

“No, it’s about Peter,” Happy said, his face twisted into a stern expression.

“I know. I didn’t handle that...well.”

“No, you didn’t, but I’ll let you stew on that by yourself.” Happy said, his face dour still and Tony felt his shame returning full force.

“Look, I don’t know what’s going on, but today, the guy – *Kevin* –“ Happy’s face looked like he had put something disgusting in his mouth as he said his name. “- he said to Peter that he would ‘tell May about Ben’ if Peter didn’t come home.” Happy’s brow was tightly lined. “What is that about?”

Tony’s forehead began to take the same shape. What did that mean? Tell her what about Ben? The guy had something on Peter. Something he wouldn’t want May to know. Enough that he would put up with being beaten and maybe even go back to it. Was that what Peter hadn’t been saying all along?

“I have no idea,” Tony muttered.

“Well, we’re gonna have to find out, cos the kid looked ready to faint when he said that.”

Tony sat back against the counter as Happy reopened his paper and looked at it. Could this be the real reasoning behind him staying in that situation for so long? Some kind of threat. Tony looked to the closed door of Peter’s room feeling a skip in his heart at the altercation earlier. He was going to have to do better with tomorrow’s conversation.

Peter

It was a cold, dark room. There were eyes, eyes everywhere. Green; burning into his face. He had to move, he had to run.

'Peter!'

It was May, she was stuck behind a see-through door. He ran and pulled at the handle, but it wouldn't break.

Then he was in a room full of the see-through doors. Everyone he loved was stuck behind them. May, Ned, Tony, Alfie, Morgan, Pepper, MJ, Happy...

He tugged at all of the doors, but he couldn't open them and they all kept screaming his name.

Then he realised they weren't screaming for him they were telling him to look out. He felt arms on him and then pain as he hit into a wall.

There were fists on him again and again and he fought against them but there were too many.

Then a hand was round his throat. Tony? It changed then to the green eyes of the Vulture, the dead eyes on Thanos and then Kevin, squeezing until he couldn't breathe anymore.

He jumped awake; his arms flung out. His hand connected with something and as he turned he heard a high-pitched shrill scream coming from a crumpled body on the floor. *Morgan.*

"Oh my God," he leapt off the bed and over to her in a millisecond. There was blood pouring from her nose. Oh my god, he had done that.

Tony and Pepper arrived at the door; both of their eyes widening at the sight.

"What happened?" Pepper gasped as they both knelt on the floor by Morgan.

“Peter hit me!” Morgan wailed.

Tony shot him a look as he gathered Morgan up.

“I...didn’t mean to...I didn’t know she was there,” he stuttered, following close behind them. “I’m sorry.”

“Get the first aid kit,” Pepper said to him as they got to the kitchen. Peter did that as Tony put Morgan on the island and Pepper got some tissues to stem the bleeding. “And an ice pack.”

Peter did that quickly; his hands shaking as he passed it to Pepper.

Morgan was still crying but had calmed a little. That changed when Pepper pressed the ice pack to Morgan’s face, and she let out another shriek that sent Peter’s stomach into a flip.

“Should I call a Doctor? Does she need the hospital?”

Pepper shook her head; not looking at Peter as she tried to finger Morgan’s bloodied hair out of her face. “She’ll be fine.”

“I could go and get her plushie...” Peter rambled; wanting to do something to help. “Or ice cream...”

“Peter!” Tony cut him off; his tone sharp. “Just go to your room and wait for me.”

A stone settled in his stomach at the familiar words. His body started to shake as he made it to his room and closed the door. It intensified; shudders flowing through his limbs. He’d done it. He had finally ruined the last good thing in his life.

Go to your room and wait for me.

He hadn’t thought that Tony would ever hit him, not even when they were arguing yesterday, but surely this was different. He’d hurt Morgan and now Tony and Pepper would never look at him

the same again. Even a beating from Tony wouldn't change that.

He couldn't stay here. He couldn't. Not now.

Tony

God, he hated this movie. How many times can a child want to watch the same thing? Ok, the main character had cool ice powers, but surely that wasn't as impressive as a metal suit that your own father had designed and developed himself. Every time he tried to slope off, she grabbed his hand to stop him. He couldn't say no to her – particularly when she had a bruise forming on her cheek and a swollen nose crusted with blood.

They'd taken her down to Medbay and scanned her; just in case her fall had broken something. FRIDAY had reported that other than bruises to her face and one on her bottom, she was unharmed.

He knew she was going to be okay when she demanded pancakes and both Frozen movies with both of her parents. Morgan had explained what happened – that she woke up too early so went to cuddle Peter like she always does '*cause he is always warm*'; that he was wiggling around and talking when he was asleep and then she tried to wake him up and he hurt her. Tony could read through the lines and see that Peter had been having a nightmare and poor Morgan had just startled him.

Tony looked over to Pepper who'd fallen asleep at the start of the second movie. He'd better wake her as she had meetings this afternoon.

"Pep," he stroked her cheek.

She slowly opened her eyes and yawned. "Oh, right, sorry."

He smiled at her cute waking up expression. It never got old seeing that.

“You want some lunch?”

She nodded. “Where’s Peter?”

“He hasn’t come through here yet and this one wouldn’t let me go. Did you know Elsa has magic powers?” He gave her a funny look that was enough to burst out a beautiful smile from her.

“Go and talk to him. You know what he’s like; he’s bound to be blaming himself.”

Tony nodded.

“We’ll need to sit him down later and talk about the elephant in the room.”

Tony raised his eyebrow at her. “No sleepovers for Morgan ever again?”

“Well, that too, but I mean making sure he gets some psychological support. The thing on patrol, the fight, all the nightmares,” Pepper said. FRIDAY had alerted them every time Peter had a nightmare and Tony knew that they were too frequent to be brushed off. “He’s obviously not coping. Maybe some good will come of today and he’ll agree to see someone.”

Tony nodded. The last thing he wanted was the kid to turn out as emotionally constipated as he was.

“I’ll take him a sandwich to soften the blow.”

“Tell Peter I’ll watch Frozen with him later,” Morgan called as Tony went to the kitchen. A girl who always had her priorities straight.

“Boss, you have an incoming call from Midtown High.”

“Put it through FRI.” He started pulling out the sandwich stuff from the fridge. “This is Tony Stark.”

“Oh, um hi, Mr Stark...” The female voice at the other end of the line seemed unsure that she had the right number. “I’m the school secretary at Midtown High and I was just checking that we’d been given the correct details. May Parker has put you down as a secondary emergency contact for Peter Parker.”

Tony felt some muscles he hadn’t realised were tensed unfurl. “Yes, that is correct. Please use this number.”

“Oh, OK. Thank you Mr Stark. Have a good day,” the phone went dead.

Tony let out a breath. Well, that was reassuring after last night’s conversation with May. She had obviously taken him seriously and he felt himself further relax at the thought that it now wasn’t likely that he’d have to defend Peter against the NYPD.

He felt lighter now as he threw some sandwiches together for the four of them; being sure to make double for the Spiderling. He’d been doing well to start to regain some of the weight that he’d lost these last few months, but more would be good. Dr Cho was working on a formula to provide him with more calories as he just couldn’t eat enough to maintain his metabolism – as he’d gotten older he seemed to need more.

Dr Cho had even suggested that Peter’s powers might even develop more as he was still growing, but not if he didn’t get the right balance of nutrients and calories.

The idea of Peter being even more powerful wowed and scared him in equal measure. Putting on a powerful suit was one thing; he couldn’t imagine what it must feel like to have those abilities coursing through your veins. Still, the kid had a heart of gold and Tony had no qualms that he would always fight for what was right. They would have to find a therapist that they could trust. Someone he could open up to about the entirety of his life.

“Knock knock,” Tony said, unnecessarily, as he rapped on the door too. He paused and then opened the door. “Come on, I’ve got wonderbread for the wonder kid.”

The wind was blowing the blind gently back and forth as Tony surveyed the empty room. He ducked his head into the bathroom to find nothing.

“FRIDAY. Where is Peter?”

“Peter left the building via the window approximately 5 hours ago.”

Chapter End Notes

Literally cannot believe as I post this that I have received over 1000 kudos and almost 26K hits. I never imagined in my life that my story would get this kind of attention. Thank you all so much for your support and wonderful comments. It has made me push through my toothache and get this chapter out today. Love to you all 😊

Chapter 26

Peter

Peter had never travelled on Greyhound before. Truth was that before he met Tony he hadn't travelled much at all. May and Ben had taken him on a few outings over the years, but money was tight and usually needed for unexpected expenses; school trips, washing machine repair or new car tires. They usually explored the city though; called it their 'Sunday Fundays' – they would get on the subway and pick a direction, checking out local parks, and funhouses and, when he was older, museums and art galleries.

This was the third bus that he'd been on. Luckily at the moment, he didn't have a seat companion. He'd had an uncomfortable few hours seated next to a family whose kid didn't know the meaning of personal space. It had made him think of Morgan; and that was what he was desperately trying not to.

His stomach growled then; a loud enough noise that the people in the seats opposite him looked over. He felt his cheeks reddened and he turned his gaze out of the window; curling an arm around his aching stomach.

The cost of the bus ticket had taken out much of his cash. He'd bought a meal at the first rest stop but that was 9 hours ago.

"Excuse me?" An older lady was stood next to his seat. "We have too much. Would you like some?"

She was holding out a foil tray of sandwiches. His pride almost made him say no, but he quickly decided that he couldn't afford to be.

"Um, thank you, Ma'am." He felt the heat rise up his neck as he took it from her.

"You seem quite young to be travelling alone," The lady said, as she passed them over.

His empty stomach still managed to lurch. He gave his most confident smile. "I'm in college. Just

heading home to see the family for a few days.”

He stopped adding that he was ‘almost 22’ realising that the ‘almost’ would have made him sound young. At least that was what his fake ID said. He and Ned had made them last year when they were messing around. Ned’s was ‘Edward Solo’ and he was ‘Parker Peterson’. Ned had found them in a box of stuff his Mom had kept of his. They weren’t very convincing, so they’d never actually used them, but they were good enough for the bored-looking clerk who’d sold him his bus ticket.

He waited until the kind lady had retreated back to her seat before he devoured the sandwiches, barely registering what the filling was.

His body felt heavy now; the adrenaline long gone. The muscles in his body were starting to protest sitting in the same position for so long but he tried to ignore it. A phone rang then and a fleeting rush of panic hit his chest; his heart beating faster. It was ok, it wasn’t his; if Tony was looking for him, then he had little to go on. He’d ditched his phone and chosen the bus over the train; figuring there were less cameras. He didn’t leave the bus at every rest stop and just used the bathroom on board; as gross as that had turned out to be. Once he got settled, wherever that was, he’d find a way to contact them and say he was ok. Something hard to trace. A letter maybe.

Tears stung his eyes at the thought of not seeing the people he cared about again. He’d thought about leaving when things got bad with Kevin; but having Spider-man had been one motivator to stay. Now though, he couldn’t be Spider-man, not if he wasn’t in control. He had almost killed that man; he had *wanted* to. That scared him most. He created Spider-man because he wanted to help people, not hurt them.

What happened with that guy, with Flash; he was turning into a monster, no better than Kevin. He couldn’t let that happen.

Yep, leaving was for the best; what happened with Morgan was just further proof; bad things happened to him and the people around him. It was better if he kept his curse away from everyone. They could all go back to the lives they had before he snapped back, and he would soon become just a memory again.

Tony

Tony was starting to feel the effects of the lack of sleep and coffee that he'd been using to prop himself up. He drained the rest of the mug regardless and set it on the counter.

Pepper came in, dressed in jeans and a loose-fitting shirt and slid up onto the stool next to him. "Happy said he'd take her to the park for a few hours so we could get some rest."

Tony rubbed his face. "Yeah, you should do that."

"Tony...". Her hand rubbed the small of his back and the warmth released the tension in his muscles slightly. "It's been 24 hours now. Do you think we should call the Police?"

Tony exhaled a long breath. Had it been 24 hours? In some ways it felt like a week. They hadn't panicked right away. Actually, he'd been pissed off; mad that Peter had broken his grounding. Pepper had calmed him – Peter had been having a bad week – he would be feeling terrible for what happened and maybe he just needed some fresh air.

It wasn't until it got to late evening that the anger morphed into real concern. No Spider suits were gone, and FRIDAY couldn't ping his phone.

Tony had rang Ned and MJ then. Neither had heard from him and he hadn't been answering any of their messages. Tony had checked afterwards – hacking their phones – but they seemed to be telling the truth. He had also hacked May and Kevin's phones, the cameras around the apartment, and as he suspected, Peter hadn't been in contact with them either.

Peter's phone's last known location was not far from the Tower, by an ATM. Tony had found it – crushed– identifiable by the Spider-man case that Tony gave him for a joke. FRIDAY had looked up nearby cameras from earlier and found a grainy picture of Peter at the ATM. Further investigation had found that he'd withdrawn \$180 – which apparently was his entire balance.

Then, Tony started to panic.

Tony turned to his wife as she wiped her hair from her creased forehead. "My resources far outstrip the Police but I'm using all of their systems too. Any kids matching his description that are booked into any Police station from here to Texas, we'll know about it."

"I don't understand- what happened to Morgan was so clearly an accident," said Pepper, not for the

first time.

They'd watched back the video – Morgan climbing into bed with him without him even registering her, and then an hour later Peter in the throes of a terrible nightmare and he'd just knocked her off the bed. With his strength it was a miracle that it wasn't worse – not that Tony would mention that to Pepper.

“Let's just say what we are both thinking; it's my fault. If I hadn't shouted at him that evening, if I'd woken him up to talk about it. Shit, he might have been having a nightmare about me.” He looked up to the sky in an attempt to stem the tears that threatened to fill his eyes.

“Don't say that.”

Tony suddenly wanted to get away from the conversation. He couldn't bear to think about how the kid had looked at him: Morgan's protective stance in front of him.

“FRIDAY, any updates?”

“Nothing further to report Boss.”

“Go and sleep. I'll be down in the workshop.” He pushed out his stool and planted a kiss on her forehead.

“Tony...”

“I...just have to be doing *something*, ok?”

Pepper nodded; she understood his coping mechanisms and had never been able to fully change them. He was thankfully she wasn't going to try now.

—

Peter

“Hey Cooper,” Peter said, stepping out from behind the tree, blending in with all the other High school students that were milling around after school.

Cooper’s face brightened in surprise. “What are you doing here?”

That was a good question. He didn’t really know. When the bus was pulling into St Louis, he suddenly had the idea that he could find them. He desperately needed food and a proper sleep, and they had that big barn away from the main house. He’d never known their address, but he remembered seeing Arcadia High School printed on Lila’s jumper when they had video chatted one time. A quick stop to the library and he had found a route to Arcadia, using his stickiness to hitch a ride on top of a truck.

Before he could answer, Lila was there. “Peter! I didn’t know you were coming.”

Peter rubbed the back of his head. “I-I didn’t know I was coming either.”

Cooper turned to Lila. “That explains Dad’s 20 questions this morning.”

“Your Dad was asking about me?” Peter felt his mouth dry: suddenly coming here felt like even more of a mistake.

“Just asking if we had heard from you lately. Had you ever talked about places you wanted to visit etc.” Lila said, hitching her rucksack. “Thought it was a bit odd, but then so is Dad.”

Peter relaxed a bit. No-one knew he was there. Tony was probably just checking all the bases.

Why is he bothering to look for me after all the trouble I’ve caused; after what I did?

“They aren’t picking you up?” He suddenly worried that he was going to get busted straight away.

“No, Dad takes Nate to soccer and then they’re having a team pizza party tonight. He’s picking Mom up from work on the way back – they’ll be back about 6. You want to come back to ours?”

Peter nodded.

There was a honk from a bus in the corner.

“That’s our bus, c’mon. It’s a long walk if we miss it.”

Peter followed behind them to the furthest yellow bus. As he climbed up the step, the bus drivers hand shot out in front of him.

“I don’t recognise you.” The guy had a soul patch and a scowl.

“Chill Larry, he’s an exchange student. He’s coming home with me,” Cooper interrupted.

This seemed to interest the older guy. “Where are you from?”

Peter cleared his throat. “London.” Shit, why had he said that. He’d need an accent. “Just visiting for a while.”

“Cool. I’ve always wanted to go.”

“Come on Larry, I want to get home and watch Netflix.” A disgruntled voice called from the back of the bus.

They took that opportunity to slope away from further questions and poor attempts at a British accent. They joined Lila where she’d saved some seats for them.

“How did you get so good at a British accent?” Cooper smiled.

“I have no idea. Totally panicked.” Peter felt a smile crack briefly across his face: it felt foreign.

“So...” Cooper said, after a moment skipped past and the bus thundered along the road.

“So, did you like, run away from home?” Lila asked, fidgeting in her seat.

Had he? Maybe even twice – first May’s and then Tony’s.

“I-I guess.”

“What happened with your Aunt?” Lila’s voice was softer.

“Actually, I’ve been living with Mr Stark for a few weeks.”

Cooper’s eyes widened. “Dude, you ran away from Iron Man?”

“Um, yeah, I guess I did.” Peter felt his palms sweat, just a bit. “I don’t really want to talk about it.”

“Sure, yeah,” Lila responded. “What about my parents?”

“I-I don’t want them to know. Can you like, not, tell them? I just need to crash in the barn tonight and then I’ll go first thing. They won’t even know I was there.”

Lila’s look at Cooper showed she wasn’t sure, but he seemed less bothered. “No problem. We’ll get you some food to take with you. We can keep a secret, can’t we, Lila?”

Peter’s heart was in his throat as he watched Lila bite her lip between her teeth before finally nodding.

“Thanks, I really appreciate it.” Peter felt relief sag his whole body.

The bus dropped them off at the end of the dirt road and they walked up to the farmhouse.

Cooper headed straight for the kitchen. “You’re hungry, right?”

Peter’s empty stomach turned in on itself. “Starving. Used most of my money on a bus ticket.”

“Did you come on the bus to avoid Mr Stark’s tech finding you? Ditched your phone?”

Peter nodded. “Figured there would be less cameras.”

“Here,” Lila pushed the fruit bowl in front of him and Peter gratefully took an apple and started chomping.

Cooper rummaged around in the fridge. “We don’t have a lot in – Mum’s bringing home take out tonight. Could do some eggs and toast though?”

“Honestly; anything is good. I can cook it.”

“No, do you want to have a shower though...?”

“Cooper!” Lila said, her face shocked.

Peter smelt his top – he did not smell good after sitting on a bus for 30 hours which was understandable. “Ugh, hell yes.”

“Knock yourself out – towels are in there and if you need any clothes help yourself.”

The shower made Peter feel more alive, although tiredness pulled at every pore of him. He wolfed down the food that Cooper made and then they all went over to the barn. Lila had brought some

blankets and a pillow over for him. She even brought him two books to take with him, realising that he didn't have much entertainment without a phone.

They were playing video games on the old TV for a while before Lila spoke up.

“Where will you go, Peter?”

The question was an obvious one, but Peter didn't have an answer.

“Um, California, I guess.” The most distance he could put between himself and the huge mess in New York, the better.

“Is it really so bad that you can't make it up with Mr Stark?” Cooper asked.

Peter pushed his nails into his palm remembering Morgan's bloodied face; the look of terror when she looked at him. *'Peter hit me.'*

He had made her look at him like that – with fear. There's no way he could go back. He couldn't forgive himself, so how could they forgive him? He couldn't speak all that, but just shook his head.

Before there could be any more conversation, his ears pricked up at a sound.

“A car is coming.”

“I don't hear anything,” Lila said.

“Well, just in case,” Cooper said, standing up. “I'll try to sneak you out some food later.”

Lila came and gave him a small hug which he returned. “Email us or something when you get to California.”

“I’ll send you a postcard.” He gave her a half smile.

Cooper gave him a pat on the back before he and Lila disappeared out of the barn.

—

Peter jumped up from reading his on the couch when he heard someone coming towards the barn. He grabbed his bag and ducked down: his heart thundering.

“Peter, it’s me...” Cooper’s voice whispered.

The muscles in his body relaxed and he slid out from behind the sofa. Cooper was carrying a pizza box. “I got the leftovers – I usually take them to school for lunch but I’ll just tell Mom I was extra hungry.”

Peter took it from him thankfully and opened it to see 6 large pieces. It wouldn’t be enough to placate his supercharged metabolism, but it was better than nothing.

“Won’t your Mom and Dad notice you’re gone?” Peter’s eyes darted in the direction of the house, even though he couldn’t see it from here.

“I slipped out while they were watching “Great British Bake Off”. Dad never moves an inch when that show is on.”

Peter let a smile onto his face at the idea of the highly trained operative being obsessed with a baking show.

“I won’t risk staying though. Look, here,” Cooper dug into his pocket and pulled out a wad of cash. “I’ve saved up a bit. Take it.”

Peter put his hand up. “I can’t take your money, Cooper.”

“You’re going to need it,” Cooper said, “besides, I shot you with an arrow, take it as

compensation.”

Peter managed to match Cooper’s crooked smile. He really did need the money. “Once I get there and get a job, I’ll send it back to you. I promise.”

Cooper shrugged it off, putting his hands in his jean pockets. He looked up at Peter then; his blue eyes full of doubt.

“Are you...sure about this, Peter?” The waver in his voice only matched Peter’s own uncertainty.

He nodded but didn’t make eye contact.

“Alright then, I better go,” Cooper extended his arm and Peter grabbed it, Cooper pulling him in for a quick bro hug. He paused before he reached the door. “Don’t forget that postcard.”

Tony

“I’m sorry Mr Stark, sir, I think I served him, but I’m not certain.” The clerk looked like he would rather be anywhere but here under Tony’s heated gaze. But Tony had spent time tracking down all of the employees that had been working in the timeframe that Peter had been here – judging from a half shot of his face FRI had picked up from CCTV outside the Port Authority bus station – so he wasn’t going anywhere without answers.

Tony pointed at the hologram photo of Peter that he’d projected. “Look again.”

The clerk – a thin, reedy looking guy – swallowed and looked at the photo again. “Like I–I said, I’m pretty sure I sold him a bus ticket...I’m sorry...we get a lot of people through here.”

“Yeah, but this kid looks 12 and you still sold him a ticket?” Tony tried not to take his mounting anger out on this guy, but it was a close thing.

“He did look young but he had ID.”

Tony couldn't quite believe that Peter had a fake ID – the kid was too straight laced. If he did, it was probably for the purpose of sneaking into an R-rated sci fi movie.

“Where was he headed?”

The clerk looked like he was about to shrug and realised that would not go down well.

“I'm not exactly sure,” he almost whispered, “but it was definitely somewhere on the west coast.”

West Coast. As far away as possible without needing a passport. That seemed like something a scared teenager would do.

Tony shot a scowl at the practically shaking man and, without saying another word, paced out of the station and back to the waiting car.

“Anything?” Happy asked, as he slipped in beside him.

Tony shook his head. “Fucking incompetents. Most he could remember was that he was headed to the West Coast.”

“Fuck,” Happy murmured as he pulled the car out. “Home?”

Tony nodded and let out a long breath. There was no more footwork to do here. He'd have to get back and focus FRIDAYS efforts on all the bus routes; rest stops along the way. This new information hadn't helped really – FRI was already doing that - but at least they knew what direction he was headed in. That was something, right? Cold fear mixed with dark anger coiled in his gut. As time went on, he wasn't sure if they found him, whether he would hug him or murder him.

If. No – *when* - when they find him. The alternative was too scary to imagine.

A new message chirped from his phone. It was from the team's group chat – looking for an update. He'd contacted them to see if they'd heard from Peter. It had been a categorical 'no' across the board, but he'd been warmed by the influx of support: Sam and Bucky even offering sky and ground support straight away. There wasn't much they could do for now that FRI and his army of (probably illegal) surveillance drones weren't already, but it was nice to know he had back up. Tony had just told them that there had been a minor accident with Morgan and Peter took off – even now he didn't want to divulge Peter's secrets, not after how sensitive he was about people knowing.

Happy dropped him off at the Tower and he made his way up to the Penthouse. The lights of the city shone through the gigantic wall to ceiling windows as he brewed himself another coffee. Sleep was for losers, or those without massive guilt complexes, anyway.

He'd refilled his cup and was on his way back to the lab when he heard a noise down the hallway. As he approached, he could see the door to Peter's room was ajar when he distinctly remembered closing it. Was he back? If FRI had failed to tell him something of this importance, she was going on the scrap heap.

Tony pushed the door open and his voice was full of hope; "Peter?"

There was an intake of breath and his eyes darted in it's direction to see a small pair of feet sticking out from under the bed.

"Morgan?"

"Hey Daddy," her muffled voice came out.

He watched her little bottom wriggle backwards as she started to get out from under the bed.

"Morgan, you should be in bed. It's very, very late." He tried not to let his exhaustion seep into his tone but it was inevitable.

She was out now and the bruised face smiling back up at him was hard to be angry with. He couldn't imagine it was a coincidence that she had wound up in here. She had been full of questions all afternoon about where Peter was and when he would be home.

Tony picked her up and gave her a hug; her fluffy pajamas soft under his hands.

“You couldn’t sleep?”

She shook her head; chocolate strands of hair shaking around her. “So I came to do what Peter said.”

Tony frowned.

“What is that?”

“He says if I can’t sleep, to wear one of his tops to remind me he will always look after me. Like he does with your stuff.”

Tony’s throat felt dry.

“With my stuff?”

“Your jumpers. He said they smell like you, so he knows he’s safe. He said he will always keep me safe, so I can wear his too.”

She held up a lump of t-shirt that she must have retrieved from under the bed. She started to try to pull it on and he found himself numbly helping her instead of thinking about the words she’d just uttered. It was one of his god awful science pun t-shirts. This one was of two atoms with the speech bubble *“I lost an electron”*. *“Are you positive?”* It was so quintessentially Parker.

“Come on sweetie.” He hugged Morgan closer as he turned and walked her back to her bedroom. As he did, he took a tentative sniff of the t-shirt. It was Pete alright: his aftershave mixed with his own personal scent: luckily not a typically bad teenage one. It did nothing but make him miss Peter even more.

He lay Morgan down in bed: the t-shirt completely covering her like an oversized dress. Morgan moved away from him: eyes closed and oblivious to the emotional storm she had raised in him by virtue of her words. She turned on her side – one fist full of the covers and the other a fistful of

Peter's t-shirt. He stroked her hair one last time as he eased himself off the bed.

"Peter be home soon, yeah?" She murmured sleepily.

Tony pushed down the sob that wanted to rise in his throat. *Home*. This was Peter's home now. It didn't feel right without him here.

Tony pressed a kiss into her hair. "I hope so sweetheart."

Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

I was having a big crisis of confidence with this chapter, so much so that I took the plunge and reached out to the wonderful JolinarJackson, whose writing I love, to see if she could offer some advice. Despite not ever having talked to me before, she gave advice and took a look at the chapter for me - and in record time. How lovely is that! The IronDad community is so supportive. Big thank you to her.

(If you haven't checked out her work - I would highly recommend. Hope she doesn't mind my posting her page link...

<https://archiveofourown.org/users/JolinarJackson/pseuds/JolinarJackson>)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Peter

The birds woke him in the morning. Bright sunshine was streaming through the boards and into the barn, but without his phone, he had no idea what time it was. He flicked the TV on – it was almost 6am, crap, he'd wanted to get away earlier than that. His bag was already packed, so he slid it over his shoulder and headed out of the barn.

“Going somewhere?”

Peter's heart thumped as he turned to see Clint, sat on a bale of hay outside the barn door. He had a piece of partially crafted wood in his hand and a small knife – a pile of shavings at his feet testament to how long he'd been there.

Clint stood up now – his expression neutral – and Peter gripped his bag tighter. His eyes darted around his surroundings. There was nowhere to run here in the middle of nowhere. Nothing he could swing away on.

“I thought you'd never wake up.” Amusement was still tinkering in Clint's tone, but Peter had no idea why.

“They told you,” Peter said flatly.

Clint's eyebrow raised; his bright, blue eyes flashing with intensity. "No, actually. I'm a spy, did you really think I wouldn't notice someone else on my property?"

Peter hadn't really accounted for that.

"That and the fact that I know Cooper can't eat that much pizza in one night without puking."

There was a pause.

"Come on, you look like you could use a warm drink."

Clint started walking towards the house and Peter didn't know what else to do other than to fall in step behind him.

"Take a seat, Itsy Bitsy," Clint said, as they made it into the warmth of the farmhouse. Peter sat down at the kitchen table as Clint pottered behind him; the sound of the kettle boiling telling him what he was doing.

Peter etched his fingernail into a groove of the wooden table and started scratching it back and forth. What was going to happen now? How was he going to get away? Maybe he could convince Clint it was for the best? His spiralling was stopped by a mug of hot chocolate being placed in front of him, along with two pieces of toast.

"Eat; you're going to need your strength."

Peter had no appetite, but he started eating the toast for something to do: an excuse not to look at Clint and have to explain himself.

"So, why are you here?" Clint said, sitting down across from him, one arm on the table and the other on the back of his chair. Peter looked up at his serious expression.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to compromise your location, or anything. I was sort of in the area and I-I

needed somewhere to crash for the night before I headed off.”

“Where were you going to go?”

Peter shrugged and he heard Clint sigh.

“You’ve had a lot of people worried.”

His face crumpled. Why would Tony and Pepper be worried? Surely they should be glad he’d left after everything.

“It was an accident Peter. No one blames you.” Clint’s voice was heavy; his eyebrows knitted together. Peter saw the flash of the image of Morgan; could hear her scream. He shook his head before pushing his nails into the wood harder, deepening the groove.

Well they should blame me. I’m always causing bad things to happen.

“She is hurt because of me.” Peter mumbled towards the table. He heard the unmistakable sound of a jet and his head snapped up to look at Clint. “You told him?”

Clint’s face creased even more. “Of course.”

Peter looked back down; nausea rising in his throat. Clint’s hand clapped his shoulder.

“Come on – you know how he hates waiting.”

Peter didn’t say anything as they left the house and walked across the field. Tony had brought the Quinjet this time. Peter hadn’t been on it before, but there was no space within him to feel excited at the prospect. As they got closer, Tony came down the gangway, his face hardened.

“Barton,” Tony’s voice was stern. Peter wrapped his arms around his body and kept his gaze to the grass, but he could feel Tony’s eyes boring into him. “Get in the jet, Parker.”

Peter started to move, but stopped in front of Clint. He pulled out the money Cooper had given him. “Cooper gave me this. Can you...?” Clint took the money from him with a sad nod. “I just turned up. They didn’t know I was coming. Please don’t be mad at them.”

Clint’s face softened again, and he reached out and squeezed Peter’s shoulder. “No one is mad at anyone, Peter.”

Peter heard Tony scoff in the background; Clint sending a harsh look in Tony’s direction.

“I haven’t got all day, Parker.” A shiver went through Peter’s body at Tony’s words. He turned and made his way up into the jet, keeping a wide berth and without making eye contact.

When he got inside, he saw where Tony had been sat; a shrugged off coat on the chair. He took the furthest away chair he could find and sagged into it.

Peter could hear the two men talking but decided not to listen in. After a few minutes, he heard Tony coming up the gangway and a hiss as the back of the hangar closed behind him. He looked up slightly when Tony’s back was at the front of the jet, tapping into the controls; being sure to look away when Tony turned.

He could feel the anger radiating off of him. Peter waited for him to speak; to shout even, but the silence continued. It was a number out of Kevin’s playbook; silent treatment and angry stares, before he got the chance to release it with his fists. The waiting was awful. This time though, it felt different. He knew he really deserved it. He’d just wait until Tony was ready and then he would take it all.

—

The two hours felt like days as he sat staring into space, scratching his nail along the sole of the shoe. Now he was on his way back – *to the scene of the crime* - he kept replaying what had happened in his mind over and over; his heart rate spiking every time he saw Morgan crying in Pepper’s arms and Tony yelling at him to go to his room. He should have just waited there and taken his punishment. Running away like this would make it so much worse. But still whatever Tony did; it would be warranted. He pulled his mind away from imagining what ways he would do it- that made his stomach want to reject the toast.

“Boss, we have arrived in New York and will be landing at the Tower in approximately 2 minutes.”

Every muscle in Peter’s body tensed and he tried to let out a breath. The landing was soft, and he could sense Tony moving.

He heard rather than saw Tony’s click of his fingers. “Come.” Peter followed him obediently into the penthouse.

His head was swimming as he came back into what he had been calling his home for the last few weeks. The familiar smell that was normally so welcoming made his pulse flutter. The mid-morning light streaming through just felt wrong when everything that had happened when he was here last had been so black. He heard Tony call for Pepper but then his grip on his bag tightened as he heard the accompanying smaller, quicker steps.

His heart rate soared as Morgan ran towards him calling his name; her face so full of a smile that you could barely see the bruise that ran from her cheek down to the side of her slightly swollen nose. Seeing the now-developed bruises on Morgan’s face was too much. His stomach clenched so tightly he almost gagged. He moved away from her outstretched arms.

“I’m sorry,” he mumbled the words that didn’t mean anywhere near enough. He headed for his room. *I can’t do this. I can’t do this. This is all my fault. Sweet innocent Morgan.*

“Peter...Peter,” Tony’s annoyed voice came from behind him. It was deep and low; anger beneath it.

Peter needed it to be over and done with now. He made it to his room and went over to the wardrobe. It was in here somewhere.

Tony had made it to the door of the room. “I’m not letting you leave, Peter.”

His voice was firm; he understood. It was better if it was in here where Morgan couldn’t see. Peter felt the soft leather beneath his hands; he pulled it from the hanger.

Tony’s face was wrinkled in confusion as Peter turned around. In two steps Peter was in front of him; afraid to look into his eyes and see the disappointment; the hatred he knew would be there.

He pressed the belt into Tony's hands before quickly whipping his top over his head and leaning up against the wall; his chest rising and falling rapidly as he waited for Tony to begin. When nothing happened for a moment, he dared to look under his arm at Tony. He wasn't speaking but his eyes were full of tears. There was a soft thud as the belt slid from his hand to the floor.

Peter grabbed it from the floor and pushed it back into Tony's hands, but he wouldn't take it.

"I'm not going to beat you, Peter." His voice sounded pained.

Peter's heart rate increased. What was he talking about?

"I hurt Morgan, Mr Stark. She has bruises because of me. You-
you have to."

Tony didn't speak again, but just shook his head and a tear rolled down his cheek. Maybe he didn't want to do it that way.

"I'll just stand here, ok? You can just hit me and get it over with, I won't fight back."

Tony looked up to the sky, pained, tears flowing down his cheeks now. "God, Kid. Why would I do that?"

Peter felt his heart jump. Why didn't he understand? He deserved it. Peter went and grabbed Tony's top in both hands. "I hurt her. I need you to..."

Peter pushed him then; something to ignite the anger; to stop it smouldering. He couldn't take the waiting. That was almost worse. But Tony didn't make a move.

"Come on Mr Stark," he pushed him again, harder this time, dislodging him from the spot he was on. The lack of response from him was just making his heart work in overtime. If he did it, then everything would be back in balance, and maybe it could go back to how it was.

The third time Tony caught him by the wrists and didn't let go. "No," his voice said loudly, "I

won't hit you. Ever."

Peter looked up at him now; his throat so thick he could barely breathe and as he spoke, tears flooded down his cheeks. "Please."

Tony stuffed Peter's head against his chest; his words reverberating against Peter's ear. "No, never."

Peter pulled himself out, wrapping his arms around himself. "But everyone around me gets hurt or dies. It's me, it's me that's the problem."

"You've been really unlucky. And what happened with Morgan was just that – an accident. She still loves you." Tony reached for Peter again, but he backed away; he didn't deserve comfort. "Kid, you don't have a bad bone in your body."

Tony didn't understand. *Everyone I care about gets hurt. I'm the common denominator.* "That's not true. Ben would be alive if it wasn't for me." Peter spat out.

Tony shook his head and stepped towards him again. "Pete, you can't blame yourself for that...a criminal shot him."

"He was only out because he was looking for me, because I had a fucking tantrum -thinking I was some big shot because I suddenly had powers. I let the guy go past me – I could've stopped him. I could've stopped him. But Ben, of course Ben tried. I wouldn't have been hurt. It should have been me. Kevin is going to tell May and she will hate me." Peter backed up and against the wall as he held his hands up; remembering how Ben's blood had coated them. He looked up to Tony then who was edging closer to him.

"Don't get close to me." He flung a palm out. "I can't be around you guys anymore; don't you see that? You'll only end up hurt and I can't do it again. My parents, Ben. I can't do it. I heard your heart stop on the field. I heard it stop and I knew that I'd done it again; I'd cursed you."

"You're not a curse Peter, my God, you are the opposite for me," Tony said, tears flowing again, "do you have any idea how few people I have let into my life; into my family. But you; you were the easiest. You know you're my kid now, right?"

“No, I’ll just curse you like I do all my family. Kevin was right, I should have just stayed dead.”

“No, don’t say that!” Tony’s voice rose to a shout for the first time and it caused Peter to flinch. Tony surged forward and wrapped his arms around Peter.

Any resistance Peter felt washed away, his body going limp against Tony. The sudden weight change unbalanced Tony and they both slumped to the floor. Tony didn’t let him go, wrapping his arms around him and letting him sob. He rocked him gently. “I love you Peter. I can’t lose you again. Do you hear me? I won’t.”

Tony

The kid hadn’t said a word yet since they’d boarded the jet an hour ago. Not a word. Not even one of his usual endless apologies. Tony clenched his jaw and tried to heed Clint’s words; that Peter was mortified about hurting Morgan, to take it easy on him.

But two days. Two days he hadn’t heard from him. No one had.

He looked over at Peter again who was hunched in his seat, turned as much away from Tony as was possible without looking like a pretzel. He wasn’t asleep but Tony could see that he was scratching his thumb against the sole of his trainer repetitively. He was going to wear right through and separate the sole from the upper part if he wasn’t careful. He looked like a hopeless, wane figure.

No. Stop. Don’t feel sorry for him. He just put you through hell.

Tony thought of the wild goose chase he had just gone through. Tracing the smashed phone; the bank account. The city-wide camera hack had seen a flash of an image of him at Port Authority station, hood up, but then there was no telling which bus he had gotten on. Then his clerk interrogation followed by FRIDAY looking for images of him at every bus station from here to California.

Pepper had wanted him to tell May, but he had pushed back on that. He was pretty sure that May would make good on her threat to call the Police this time. He had told himself that if he didn’t

have any leads after a full two days had passed that he would tell May and the Police himself. When Clint had rung him at 3 in the morning, he had almost thrown up in relief; the release of tension had made him feel lightheaded. Peter was ok; the kid was ok.

Tony felt fuzzyheaded. He hadn't slept at all. He needed to calm down a bit and try to sleep a little. Otherwise the conversation that they were going to have was going to be all kinds of a shit storm. Pepper wanted him to wait til they got home anyway; though he hadn't been planning on it, truthfully. Now though; he could see it might be best.

He got his phone out and tapped out a quick; "*Found him, he's safe*" message to the team and Peter's friends, who immediately came back with relief messages and more questions which he chose to ignore. Not wanting Peter to hear, he tapped out a message to FRIDAY.

"Make sure Peter doesn't try to leave the jet."

"Would it be likely he would try to leave a moving jet, Boss?"

"With this kid, who knows."

Tony didn't think he would be able to, but he sat back in the chair, pressed his eyes closed and tried to slow his breathing.

—

"Boss, we have arrived in New York and will be landing at the Tower in approximately 2 minutes."

Tony peeled his eyes open; ok wow, he wasn't expecting to have been able to sleep. He wiped at his eyes and yawned. He looked over to Peter – he was still sat in the same position, his finger still moving repetitively in the same spot but now Tony could see specks of blood on the shoe. His instinct to see if he was ok sprung up but he quashed it up. No, he had to be firm with the kid. He had to *calmly* explain that there was no way that this could ever happen again. He couldn't be worried like that - he honestly wasn't sure if his heart could take it. Now was not the time to coddle, as much as he wanted to; he had to impress the seriousness of this on him. Then talk about why he'd thought the solution was to bolt. Then a hug that he suspected he'd never want to let him out of.

The jet landed and as the doors opened he stood up and snapped his fingers in Peter's direction.
"Come."

Peter trudged behind him down from the jet and into the penthouse; the doors opening for them as they approached.

"Pep?" He called out and he heard her and Morgan's voices.

They rounded the corner together and Tony sensed Peter stop as they did.

"Oh Peter, are you alri-" Pepper stopped mid-sentence as Tony gave a sharp shake of the head to her. He wasn't going to let her sooth him yet. They had to have a serious talk first.

"Peter!" Morgan sang. She was not one to notice or care about social cues. She was just happy he was back. Tony watched as she ran to him. Peter looked up at her – the first time Tony had really seen his face since he picked him up. It made him jolt – the kid looked like someone had hollowed him out from within as he took in Morgan. She put her arms out to hug him and he sidestepped away from her. "I'm sorry" he mumbled and shot off in the direction of his room.

Tony started after him. There was no way in hell he was getting off that easy. Did he think the response to his little stunt was a meagre apology and disappearing off to mope in his room? Fuck that.

"Peter...Peter."

He didn't even turn when Tony spoke, which made his blood boil even more.

"Be calm," Pepper called softly as Tony made it to his door.

Peter was in the closet. He thinks he can just pack a suitcase now and leave? What the hell?

"I'm not letting you leave, Peter." Tony hoped his voice sounded as commanding as he wanted it to

do. He wanted him to know that he had no choice. He was practically his father – whether the kid liked it or not – and he was going to listen; and then, for once, he would have to talk. The muscles in Peter’s back unfurled a little and he turned to face Tony; his face blank.

Peter was suddenly in front of him and Tony could barely register what had been pushed into his hands before the teenager had taken his top off and placed his hands against the wall; waiting.

He’d never liked that expression of a change of mood being like air deflating from a balloon, but it couldn’t have better fit how he felt right then. As he registered that it was a belt that had been put into this hands, all of the anger he felt just dissipated. He looked from the soft leather of the belt to Peter’s slim back; as if trying to really compute what was happening. Some of his ribs were still slightly showing where he hadn’t yet regained all of the weight he’d lost. Tony remembered the night he’d seen hideous marks of anger littering his back. The kid wanted him to...– he was expecting *that*? He thought he *deserved* it for what happened to Morgan?

Tony let the belt drop to the floor; even holding it now turned his stomach. Peter’s head turned at the sound and a look of profound confusion filled his face. He jerked away from the wall and picked the belt off the floor, pushing it against him again; his eyes flitting to his and away quickly.

“I’m not going to beat you, Peter.” Tony’s mouth was dry, and the kid looked even more panicked.

“I hurt Morgan, Mr Stark. She has bruises because of me. You- you have to.” Peter’s voice implored and it was like a vice in Tony’s chest.

What could he say to that – it was an accident – clear as day. He couldn’t control having a nightmare. Why would he think he should be punished for that? God, had he run away because he thought that *Tony* was going to punish him for it – hurt him?

He couldn’t speak again but just shook his head; not caring that a tear landed on his cheek. For some reason, this action seemed to give Peter an idea and he took a half step forward, clasping his hands behind his back.

“I’ll just stand here, ok? You can just hit me and get it over with, I won’t fight back.”

Had he been tense the whole way here because he had been waiting for it to happen? That’s why he had come in here to get the belt – he wanted to stop waiting. He remembered the feeling of having been sent to his room to wait for his father. Not knowing if he was going to just get berated

or a smack around the face. The wretchedness of not knowing. And what had Tony said to him when Morgan was hurt. *Go and wait for me in your room.* He hadn't meant it that way at all – he just wanted to deal with one upset child at a time. He didn't realise that he might interpret that as... Tony looked up – he didn't believe in God, but he so wished right now there was one. Or at least a hell that he could be certain that Kevin would see.

I won't fight back.

More tears fell and Peter was still waiting; waiting to be hit.

“God, Kid. Why would I do that?”

Tony's eyes widened as Peter wrapped his hands in the fold of his jumper and looked up at him; almost manically now. “I hurt her. I need you to...”

Tony tried to hold back the tears now. He thinks he deserves it.

How could I have been so blind to how much he was hurting?

His thoughts jolted then as Peter pushed him; not hard at all. Tony remembered how when he got older he would do the same with his Dad, even long after the hitting had stopped. He would push him with his sharp words; make his Dad just come out and say whatever disappointment of the day Tony was to him. Anything to break the tension.

“Come on Mr Stark,” Peter pushed him harder and it worked to get him out of his stupor so that the next time Peter went to push him, he gently caught hold of his arms. He had to make this clear; say the right words.

“No, I won't hit you. Ever.” He didn't let go of Peter's arms even when they tensed at his words.

The kid looked up at him; tears floating on the tops of his eyes so full of confusion and pain. He blinked once, causing them to stream down the side of his face.

“Please.” It was such a gentle pleading tone; so deep with need, that it was painful to hear.

Tony yanked the boy to his chest; letting out a silent sob before speaking; “No, never.”

But Peter didn’t stay, and he stepped back, looking tiny as he wrapped his arms around his naked chest. “But everyone around me gets hurt or dies. It’s me, it’s me that is the problem.”

Tony’s mind was in overdrive. The kid was so deep in self-hatred; he couldn’t see it was an accident. He couldn’t see how much he was worth.

“You’ve been really unlucky. And what happened with Morgan was just that – an accident. She still loves you.” Tony tried to touch him again, but he was too quick in moving away. “Kid, you don’t have a bad bone in your body.”

Peter’s face screwed up in an almost-anger. “That’s not true. Ben would be alive if it wasn’t for me.”

What? Some of this was about Ben. Tony had known what had happened before he recruited the kid – done the background check – read the report. Peter was there with him when he was shot by a robber. Tony stepped towards him as he spoke: “Pete, you can’t blame yourself for that...a criminal shot him.”

Peter’s eyes were angry again, but Tony knew it wasn’t directed at him. “He was only out because he was looking for me, because I had a fucking tantrum -thinking I was some big shot because I suddenly had powers. I let the guy go past me – I could’ve stopped him. I should’ve stopped him. But Ben, of course Ben tried. I wouldn’t have been hurt. It should have been me. Kevin is going to tell May and she will hate me.”

The image of Peter getting shot was a horrible one that he didn’t want to consider again. The idea that he thought he was to blame was sickening, more-so the fact that Kevin exploited that.

He remembered their first conversation. What was it he had said: *‘When you can do the things that I can, but you don’t, and then the bad things happen, they happen because of you.’* It had resonated with him deeply at the time, but it was only now that he realised that he meant that literally; that it was about Ben.

“Don’t get close to me. I can’t be around you guys anymore; you’ll only end up hurt. My parents, Ben. I can’t do it again. I heard your heart stop on the field. I heard it stop and I knew that I’d

done it again; I'd cursed you."

"You are not a curse Peter, my God, you are the opposite for me," Tony said, tears flowing again, "do you have any idea how few people I've let into my life; into my family? But you; you were the easiest. You know you're my kid now, right?"

"No, I'll just curse you like I do all my family. Kevin was right, I should have just stayed dead."

Tony felt a bolt of fury mixed with fear shoot through him. "No, don't say that!"

He grabbed the boy and hugged him so tight it made his arms hurt. Peter slumped against him and they dropped to the floor together; Peter sobbing hard against his chest, dampness spreading through the material already.

He rocked him gently. "I love you Peter. I can't lose you again. Do you hear me? I won't."

Chapter End Notes

I wouldn't normally write the exact same scene from both POVs but I really wanted to show both of their thinking. Hopefully the gamble paid off!

Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

The reaction to the last chapter was phenomenal. So many comments. So much love. Thank you all!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tony

Tony closed the door quietly behind him and let out a shuddered breath. He'd laid on the bed with the kid for an hour, whispering words he'd hoped would calm him. Words that said '*you are wanted, you are loved.*' Peter hadn't said much but drifted off to sleep in his arms quickly and Tony had watched him for a while, not wanting to leave him. He was aware that the rest of his family were outside and had no idea what was going on.

"FRIDAY, let me know as soon Peter wakes up. I don't want him left alone today."

"Yes, Boss. Mis Potts requested your presence in the lounge as soon as you came out of Peter's room."

As much as he really needed coffee right now, he circumvented the kitchen and went straight there. Pepper was curled up on the sofa with a Starkpad in her hands and a mug of something warm resting on her lap. Both of these were quickly deposited on the coffee table when she saw him enter.

"How is he?" She asked instantly.

"Not good," Tony muttered, "he, he..." Tony didn't even know where to begin to explain what had happened. Could he even voice the words? Peter thought he would hit him: he wanted him to hit him. A shiver reverberated through his body.

"I saw the footage," Pepper burst out, "when I heard him shouting, I called it up from FRIDAY." She took his hand, rubbing soothing circles whilst looking just heartbroken. "How could he think

you would...?”

Tony swallowed. “Because I’m a total asshole. We had a whole shouting match when he got suspended and I wouldn’t back down and he’d just been confronted by that bastard Kevin, but I kept on going. I’m just like Howard after all.” He wouldn’t be like his Dad in all respects – at least he would admit when he was wrong. “I didn’t even talk to him on the jet. He must have thought I was just waiting to get him home to...to...” His throat was too thick to continue.

Pepper enveloped him in a hug that he didn’t feel like he deserved.

“Tony, what you said to him in there...” Pepper’s eyes filled with tears. He knew it hadn’t been good, but he’d been so emotional.

“Bad, I know. I tried to say the right th - ”

“ - No honey, it was good. Really good.”

Tony swallowed dryly. “Yeah?”

She nodded and pulled him down to the couch. “He needed to hear how much we – *you* - care for him.”

“We need to insist on some professional help for him,” Pepper continued, “maybe Sam could refer someone to us.”

Tony nodded. He felt woefully ill-equipped to deal with his own emotions let alone anyone else’s. Besides, he’d done a stellar job helping the kid so far. “So long as he doesn’t feel like we are palming him off. We need him to talk to us too.”

Pepper nodded. “Definitely. I...I didn’t know all that stuff about his Uncle.”

“I read about what happened; but I had no idea that he blamed himself.” Tony ran his hands through his hair. “This is why he put up with Kevin, isn’t it? He didn’t want to ‘take’ another of May’s husbands away from her. What kind of twisted logic is that? Who thinks like that?”

“A similar kind of person who didn’t tell his friends that he was dying and instead pushed them away and even gave one of them control of his entire company?” Pepper looked at him with a raised eyebrow. “I hate to say it again, but are you sure you and Peter aren’t related? Should I run a paternity test?”

Tony sat back. “If only,” he murmured.

Peter

The knock on his door came ten minutes after he’d gotten up, so Peter guessed FRIDAY had been on alert. Pepper had come in earlier; sat on the edge of the bed and stroked his hair a few times before pressing a kiss to his forehead and leaving. He’d pretended to still be asleep – he couldn’t bear to face her; not yet, maybe not ever.

There was another knock. He didn’t want to answer – he currently felt like he was floating within himself; the echoes of exhaustion in his bones. He couldn’t get his thoughts together after his outburst. Shame licked at his heels but didn’t quite reach him. He just didn’t know what the rules were anymore. Everything was so muddled. It would’ve been easier if Tony had just hit him – he wouldn’t be in this in-between place. Hearing him say he loved him but unable to believe it. And anger just everywhere in between.

“Pete?” Tony’s voice rose through the door.

Can’t hide forever. Peter cleared his thick throat. “Come in.”

The door opened to a smiling Tony; but it wasn’t a genuine one. It was coated in a film of unease. Great. *Well done on the freak out, Peter.*

“Good, you’re awake. Pep went to take Morgs to her dance class and I’ve got to head down to the Compound to do a few updates. You’re going to be my wing man.”

It wasn't a question, so Peter just nodded. Tony probably didn't want him around when Morgan and Pepper got back and Peter couldn't help but agree he had good reason.

"Great, pack an overnight bag in case we don't fancy the drive back. Shower and maybe eat the sandwich I left for you in the fridge and then we'll head out."

"Yes sir," Peter said quietly.

Tony's brow crinkled for a second, but then he just smiled the fake smile harder and was gone.

--

The roads were fairly quiet on the way upstate. Tony talked on the journey; mostly about the updates he had to do and grumbling at the IT illiteracy of the rest of the team. He made some comment about Peter's new generation of Avengers bringing tech more into play with the team and Peter had let out a snort-laugh at that. Tony had seemed happy at that and then continued to berate the rest of the team's skills, totally misinterpreting Peter's response. He didn't know why he was being included in 'The New Generation' of Avengers when he couldn't even deal with one man without losing his shit. He wasn't fit to be an Avenger.

Tony must have finally tired of the mostly one-sided conversation as he quieted down and put some music on. Peter laid his head back and stared out of the window.

Some of his numbness had washed away on the drive and he couldn't help but remember everything from this morning. Had it really only been this morning? Bile rose in his stomach remembering everything that he'd said – what he'd asked Tony to do. God, he was such a fuck up. He flicked his eyes to Tony then, who was quietly singing along with a track whilst looking ahead at the road.

I love you, Peter.

It was the first time Tony had ever said that. His head thrummed; a headache starting to form. It didn't feel like those words should apply to him. Why would someone as great as Tony Stark – Earth's saviour – love him? Why would anyone?

The car pulled through the gates of the Compound. The last time he'd been here had been at the

Battle. He looked out over the fields and trees; all the damage had disappeared. As they got closer to the building, he could see that it had been rebuilt, with some minor changes to the design but it looked almost identical. Like it had never happened.

Tony parked the car in the underground garage and Peter followed him out and up in the lift to the living areas.

“Why don’t you put your stuff in your room and check it out?” Tony said, gesturing down the hallway. “It had a bit of remodelling but should be broadly the same.”

Tony headed off towards the communal space and Peter did as he was told.

He found the room and Tony was right, it looked much the same – the comforter was different but there were still Star Wars movie posters on the walls and a cabinet filled with Legos. He let a ghost of a smile reach his lips when he remembered when Mr Stark had him stay over one time. It was a few months after the Vulture, after he had turned down his offer of being an Avenger, when Tony had him come up for a training and lab weekend. He’d seen the room and almost gone back on his decision. Life had seemed a lot simpler then.

Peter dropped the overnight bag Tony had asked him to bring onto the bed. Maybe this was Tony’s plan now – move Peter out of the Penthouse and in here, away from Morgan. Tony might care for him but he wasn’t an idiot after all. Maybe living at the Compound, at least for now, wouldn’t be a bad thing. He’d miss his friends, school, but at the moment he couldn’t find the energy to care.

After half hour, he headed into the communal area, spotting Tony and Sam talking quietly at the table. They both looked up and smiled as he came in.

“Hey Mr Wilson,” Peter said politely, moving closer.

“Hey Peter, good to see you,” Sam smiled warmly at him, gesturing him to come closer. “Try one of my famous homemade cookies?”

Peter slid into the chair opposite him and picked one up from the plateful on the table. “Thanks.”

He was aware of Tony moving across the kitchen while he swallowed his mouthful. “These are really good Mr Wilson, I didn’t know you baked.”

Sam gave a small shrug. “It relaxes me. And Bucky doesn’t like store bought stuff – must be the old man in him.”

Peter smiled. “Not even Krispy Kreme?”

Sam grinned back. “Everyone likes Krispy Kreme. Even Centenarians.”

Tony set a mug of hot chocolate in front of him then, with a small squeeze of his shoulder.

“Um, thanks, Mr Stark.”

He noticed Tony still for a second before carrying on back over to the counter. He cupped the warm drink in his hands; letting the warmth snake through him.

Tony picked up his phone and tapped on the table. “Right, I’ll get on with the updates.”

Peter went to move to join him, but he put up a hand. “You stay and...enjoy your drink. I’ll catch you later.”

Peter frowned, but eased back into his seat. Surely the whole reason he was here was to help with the updates. Oh, wait no, that was because Tony didn’t want him to be left alone with Morgan and Pepper.

He sighed as Tony half-ran out of the door. He took a tentative sip of the too warm drink.

“So, how was Missouri?”

Cold curled in his veins as he looked up at Sam then. “He told you?”

“Well, he called us all looking for you on Thursday, so we kind of knew something was up. He let us know that he found you safe.”

“He shouldn’t have bothered you guys about...nothing.” Peter chewed the inside of his cheek.

“One of the team goes missing and can’t be contacted; then yeah, he’s going to tell us.” Sam’s face was serious. “It isn’t a bother.”

One of the team. I mean he wasn’t really. The only reason he was made an Avenger was because he didn’t listen to Mr Stark and stowed away on a spaceship. He was just Mr Stark’s side kick. An annoying arachnid.

“Yeah, you know we always check in with each other if we’re going to be off the grid. Make sure someone knows.”

“I’ll try to next time.”

“Is there going to be a next time?” Sam’s eyebrow raised slightly.

Peter tried to shrug it off. “We all need a break sometimes, right?”

“A break from Spider-Man?”

Peter shrugged again. “Life.”

“A break from life,” Sam seemed to be considering his words carefully, “I always got the impression that you liked your life – school, Spider-Man, home.”

Peter felt a shiver go down his spine. “Yeah, well, things change. A lot lately,” he muttered.

Sam let out a huff. “That’s true. Well, for us anyway; here one minute, then the next minute time has fast forwarded 5 years without us. It’s hard to get your head around.”

Peter nodded in agreement. “Very.”

“That’s why it’s important to have good people in your corner. People to lean on.”

Peter thought about how he’d found Tony head to head with Sam. He sat up a bit.

“And Mr Stark confides in you?”

“Sometimes. About the Battle. About home life.”

Peter caught Sam’s gentle gaze.

“Did he tell you anything about me?” Peter said, already feeling heat climbing up his neck.

Sam put his mug down.

“Just that you were living with him now; that there was an accident with Morgan, and you took off.” Sam’s fingers played with the rim of the mug. “That he is worried about you.”

“He shouldn’t.”

Sam smiled. “Well, we both know that isn’t going to happen.”

Peter stared down into his half empty mug. It would be easier if Tony just stopped caring. If May did. He could just be by himself and never be the cause of pain for anyone again.

“Do you know what I did before I became an Avenger?”

“You were in the Air Force, right? Para-rescue?”

“Yeah, but after I left the Air Force, I worked at the VA, working with soldiers suffering from

PTSD.”

Peter sat back. A therapist. A smile crept onto his face before he swallowed it quickly. Tony was a sneaky bastard. Another fucking ambush.

“I’m guessing it’s not a coincidence that I’m sat here talking to you,” he closed his eyes and let out a long breath.

“He didn’t tell me what was wrong, just that there was something going on. He thought that you might benefit from talking to someone. It doesn’t have to be me, if that’s too close to home; I can recommend someone.”

Peter shook his head again. This was unbelievable. Talking about it wasn’t going to change what had happened; none of the past.

“I don’t know what happened,” Peter shot Sam a look that he didn’t believe him. “He refused to break your trust. But look, being a hero is no easy thing. We all struggle with it. There’s no shame in that.”

“It’s not Spider-man stuff he wants me to talk about,” Peter muttered.

Sam’s eyebrow quirked at that. Hmm, so perhaps Tony hadn’t told him about Kevin after all.

“Look Mr Wilson, I’m sorry Tony has brought you into this, but talking about what h-happened is not going to help.”

“Why do you say that?”

Because I am past helping.

“It’s just something that I have to figure out by myself.”

If I’m alone, no one else will get hurt.

“That sounds very lonely.”

There’s a hurt in Sam’s eyes; an understanding that Peter can’t bear to see.

“Sometimes being alone is best for everyone,” he said, drinking down the rest of the hot chocolate and standing up. “I’m just going to stretch my legs. I’ll catch you later.”

Peter didn’t wait for a response.

Peter’s blood felt like it was pumping a mile a minute as he pushed through the doors and out into another hallway. He didn’t know where he was going, but he just needed to move; to get away from the conversation with Sam. He considered taking a walk around the grounds, but the idea of being out on the Battlefield, with all the memories it held, didn’t appeal.

After a few minutes, he found himself outside the Gym and he clenched his jaw before pushing open the doors. He made a beeline straight for the punchbag in the corner. He’d used it a few times before when they’d been training. It’d been designed with Cap’s strength in mind, so Peter wasted no time in throwing a hard punch into the middle, exhaling as he did.

He hadn’t been there for long when he heard the door open. Bucky was there in a tank top and sweats, a towel over one shoulder; his face showed that he’d obviously not been expecting someone else to be in there.

“Hey,” the older man said.

“Sorry, Mr Barnes, do you want me to...?” Peter tailed off, pointing at the door, worried he was intruding.

“Nah, you’re ok.” Bucky shrugged. “You should probably wrap your hands though.”

Peter looked down at his already red knuckles and shrugged too. He was aware of the man going over to the weights section to his right, before he turned his attention back to the bag. He built up his punches, feeling the fury start to build in his body again. After a few minutes, he sent a particular strong punch and the bag flew off, and Peter was decorated in bits of plasterboard.

“Oh Shit!”

Bucky jogged up beside him then; both of them looking up at the damage.

“I-I’m really sorry. I can climb up and fix it maybe.” He peered up at the ceiling; not actually certain how he would fix it. “Mr Stark is gonna kill me.”

Bucky let out a deep chuckle. “Don’t worry, I heard Steve did that quite a few times, and that over there,”. he pointed to a patched-up hole, “I did last month.”

Peter felt his body relax. “Oh OK, thanks.”

“I’ll tell the maintenance team later. Do you fancy sparring now instead?”

Peter let out a big grin: despite the fact he wasn’t sure about being Spider-man again, the chance of sparring with the Winter Soldier was too good to pass up.

“Yes, but I’m not so good at hand to hand – used to my webs.”

Bucky nodded. “Well, it’ll be good training then; in case your shooters get broken.”

Bucky started him off slow, throwing punches and a few kicks that Peter blocked. He started to feel a bit more confident and began offence a bit more. He threw a punch without much bite, before suddenly finding himself on his ass after Bucky kicked his legs out from under him.

“You’re being too passive. I’ve seen what you can do – you don’t need to pull your punches with me.” The man leant forward and offered Peter his hand; pulling him up swiftly.

“I know; it’s just weird when we are teammates now.”

Bucky nodded. “I get that. It helps me to imagine an enemy; someone I hate.”

Kevin’s face flashed into his mind instantly.

Bucky started to ready his stance. “You got someone in mind?”

Peter’s breath started to hitch just thinking about him and he nodded firmly, gritting his teeth as he did.

“Name?”

Peter stepped forward and raised his fists. “Kevin.”

He pushed off his back leg and started to throw punch after punch at Bucky. The man stumbled back, his eyes wide, but recovered quickly from the shock, changing his tactics instantly. They both moved seamlessly, exchanging blows and blocks. Peter managed to dodge out of the way of the metal fist coming for his head: levelling a kick into the man’s torso that had him splayed on the ground. He jumped on top of him, pushing his arm to Bucky’s throat, but before he could apply much pressure, Bucky used his weight and strength to flip him over and pin his hands to the ground. He could feel he was just about to get out of the grip; when he heard a shout.

“Get off him!”

They both looked around to see Tony stood there; his hand gauntlet activated and pointed at Bucky.

Bucky jumped off Peter immediately and put his hands up and Peter spiked up after him.

“What the hell are you doing?” Tony shouted; looking directly at Bucky still; his face red.

“Just sparring,” Bucky said coolly; though his faced showed his confusion.

“Well don’t with him,” Tony snapped, retracting his weapon.

Peter bristled; first forcing him to speak to Sam and now trying to control who he spent time with?
“Jesus, I’m not a baby. Where the hell do you get off?”

“No, what is this?” Tony gestured in Bucky’s direction. “Some more self-flagellation? Trying to get someone *else* to hit you?”

Peter felt a snake of shame slide down his back, before he started for the door. “I’m going to shower.”

“Pete, wait, I’m sorry...” he heard Tony utter, but he didn’t turn around.

Chapter End Notes

You didn’t really think it was just going to get better right away, did you? ☹️ 🙄

Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

It's not even been 24 hours and here I am with an update.

I'm actually about to head out to have a troublesome wisdom tooth removed ☹️ so I doubt I will feel much like editing for the next day or two. So I have put this chapter out early but please expect that there might not be another until the weekend. Have no idea how I will be feeling! PS Any recommendations for feel good TV/Film hit me up on here or on my Tumblr please - coming of age or angsty stuff I love the most (shocker!)

Tony

There wasn't any reason that the goddamn engine shouldn't be turning over right now. Tony retightened everything and then eased himself back out from under the car, wiping his hands on the rag to the side. He pulled himself up and turned the key. Nothing.

He barely suppressed the urge to kick the car again; the pain in his right toe reminding him that had been unwise when he did it earlier.

There was a light knock at the door and he turned hoping to see Peter and couldn't help but be disappointed when Bucky's sullen form came through the door instead.

"Barnes, what can I do for you?" He strode over to the fridge and pulled out a bottle of water. He gestured to Barnes to see if he wanted one, but the man simply shook his head and folded his arms across his chest.

"I didn't know he wasn't supposed to be in the gym."

Tony remembered that he was a man that liked to get to the point and that was one thing that he appreciated about him.

“You said you wanted us to train him.”

“I did say that, didn’t I?” Tony let out a breath. “It’s been a hell of a week. Yeah, well, I might have overreacted earlier. So…”

Tony knew he should just apologise directly, but with their history, it wasn’t something he found could easily slip off his tongue.

There was a lull before Bucky spoke; his voice stronger now.

“Who is Kevin?”

Tony’s head snapped up before looking away again. He didn’t want to betray the kid’s confidence; he knew he didn’t want people to know what had happened to him. He already felt guilty about ambushing him with Sam.

Bucky didn’t seem to need any more information from Tony after all. “Kevin hurt him.”

Tony looked up at him but didn’t say anything and this seemed to supply him with confirmation. Bucky straightened up; rolling his muscles down his back and his jaw clicking.

“And what is Kevin’s last name?” The words came out levelly, but the darker undertone was there.

“You’d want to go and hurt this guy for Peter?” Tony frowned at him.

It was Bucky’s turn to frown. “Peter is one of us.”

Tony considered him then; his mind whirring with all the changes the team had gone through since it’s inception. They were a team – all of them – and protecting their members was part of it.

“Trust me; I’ll be first in line for that job.” Tony threw his rag to the side.

Bucky nodded. "Of course. But if you need me for this or..."

The words hung and Tony nodded at him. Bucky started to turn to leave but Tony found himself speaking again.

"Are you angry at him? Steve? For leaving?" He didn't know why he decided to ask that now. Maybe because for once they were having a real conversation. Maybe because Tony's emotions were already on a knife's edge, he might as well keep plunging it in.

Bucky turned back and a rare smile came onto his face. "He deserved a chance to have a life with Peggy; deserved happiness. How could I be?"

"And what about you?"

Bucky's smile quickly dissolved. "I'm not sure that I do."

"I forgive you, you know," Tony blurted out. "Not that it was your fault. I'm not sure that means much, but anyway...."

Bucky's eyes widened. "I..." he spluttered, "...it does, thank you."

Tony could see that he appreciated the words, but his eyes showed that although he could accept forgiveness from Tony, he didn't forgive himself.

He nodded then and was gone, and Tony felt something in his chest relax. Unspoken things were a heavy weight and now, well, now he felt a little lighter.

He liked to fix things and if he couldn't help Peter right now, well, at least he'd achieved something. He sighed and turned back towards the car.

Sam sought him out not much after; but he'd moved on to the upgrades that he'd used as his excuse to come here.

"Knock knock," Sam said as he came in the room. Tony took his hands off the hologram he was manipulating. "You looked shattered."

"Thanks, is that a technical term, Dr Wilson?"

"You know I'm not actually a Dr, right?" Sam cracked a small smile.

Tony waved his hands away as if that was inconsequential, making his way over to where Sam was stood.

"How'd it go with the kid?"

Tony didn't like the grim expression that came over Sam's face. "I wish I could say that I can't tell you what we talked about, but there is nothing to tell."

Tony's heart sank. "He wouldn't talk?"

Sam shook his head.

"I thought you shrinks had 'ways to make them talk'."

Sam frowned. "Was - was that a reference to torture? You really are resistant to psychological help if you link it in your mind with torture tactics."

Tony smirked. "If the shoe fits..."

A silence hung in the air.

“I’m really fucking worried about him, Sam. I don’t know what to do to help him. I tried keeping him close; being there, but not pushing. I don’t want to say too much to break his trust but I’m not sure if maybe that is what I should be doing.” Tony shoved his hands deep into his pockets. “As much as he doesn’t want to be seen as, he is still a kid. But whatever I do...Christ. He has started calling me ‘Mr Stark’ and ‘sir’ again - and Pepper is back to ‘Ms Potts’ – he even called her ‘Ma’am’. What is - what is that about?” What Peter chose to call them wasn’t even close to the main issue but it was all he could voice right now.

Sam gave out a heavy breath. “Sounds like he’s trying to create emotional distance from you.”

Tony shook his head – but why? Tony was giving him a home, love, or at least he thought he was.

The why must have been evident from his face as Sam spoke. “Maybe he is protecting himself from losing you.”

“He hasn’t lost me - he won’t lose me - not ever. I don’t blame him for the accident with Morgan, for running off, for anything from...before...I don’t. I told him that explicitly Sam.” He rubbed his forehead roughly. “He just won’t seem to let me help.”

Sam let out a huff. “Yeah, I got as much from our short talk. Peter seems to think that dealing with everything alone is best.”

“Tell me something I don’t know.”

“He let on enough for me to know that whatever is upsetting him is not about Spider-man. It’s about home. And given that you said he moved in with you, I’m going to guess something happened at his Aunt’s place.”

Tony nodded slightly.

“Bucky mentioned what happened in the gym.”

“Oh, so he is monosyllabic to everyone else, but you get the full showreel.” Tony felt his cheeks start to heat as he thought about how he’d pointed a weapon at Barnes.

“Has Peter been hurting himself?”

“What?” Tony looked startled by that. “What makes you..?”

He remembered then what he’d snapped at the boy about self-flagellation; what that must have sounded like to Barnes. “I don’t think so – not self-harming, but this morning he tried to get me to punish him – to hit him – over the accident with Morgan.”

Sam’s jaw set: his gaze as hard as stone. “So, he was being physically abused at home.”

Tony felt like his eyebrows were trying to escape his face. “How the hell did you infer that from what I said?”

“A hunch. People who grow up in non-abusive environments don’t expect to get hit for an accident.” There was a beat before he spoke again. “You said that he wanted you to hurt him. Do you think he will hurt himself?”

The kid had just looked so lost and fragmented this morning. So much blame in his words; so much self-hate. Tony’s memory pushed forward the words – but just above a whisper. “He said that he should have stayed dead.”

Sam’s eyes widened as they caught the dread within Tony’s. “Where is he now?”

—

Tony’s heart was beating so hard as he charged up the staircase that he felt like he might be about to go into cardiac arrest. Sam was right behind him, and if the younger man thought he was going too slowly, he didn’t mention it.

They both stopped as they got to the door of the roof, where FRIDAY had said Peter was.

“Look, I know you’re close but maybe you are too close, and I should go out there and talk to

him,” Sam proffered.

Tony considered it and it felt like a good option – one where he could shift responsibility. That thought quickly dissipated. Peter was his kid. He wouldn’t let anyone else go after Morgan and this was no different.

“I...I think it should be me. He always comes up here when we come to the Compound – he likes the stars. If you come out...I don’t want him to feel cornered.”

Sam gave a sharp nod. “I’ll wait just here. If you call for me, I’ll hear you.”

Tony nodded back. He took a breath that did nothing to calm his nerves and stepped out onto the roof.

There was a cool chill in the air, despite it being early Summer, and he pulled his jacket closer to him as his eyes searched for the boy. He spotted him a few metres away; the fact that he was sat on the edge with his legs dangling over made his heart flutter. He moved forward – making enough noise to be gently heard; the last thing he wanted to do was to startle him.

He walked gingerly until he was a few feet to the side of him but also a few feet from the edge.

“Hey kid,” his throat was scratchy. Peter didn’t turn. “Checking out the stars again?”

Tony saw his shoulders shrug before he responded. “Not quite dark enough to see them all yet.”

“Maybe we should go get some dinner then, come back out later.” There was no response. “What do you say? We head back inside.”

“I dunno, you got any more ambushes for me?” Peter looked over his shoulder at him then, a raised eyebrow, but there wasn’t any sharpness in his tone.

“You make it sound like Sam was going to tackle you to the ground and force you to talk at gunpoint.” Humour was always his brand, but it didn’t feel right in this situation.

Peter suddenly pulled himself up to standing then; his feet now teetering over the edge. Tony's whole body tensed, and he staggered forward on instinct.

Peter saw his reaction and his brow furrowed before he looked down at his position. He turned his body back towards Tony now.

"Do you think I want to...?" He gestured off the side of the building, looking almost hurt by the suggestion.

"I don't know. After this morning...I just know that you're scaring me right now." Tony's voice was tight with emotion.

Peter looked more despondent as he looked back out into the darkening sky.

"I'm sorry," Peter took a gulp. "I didn't mean to do that."

Tony felt relief flood him as Peter took several steps away from the edge.

"I didn't mean to scare you. I don't want you to worry about me anymore Mr Stark, OK?" He licked his lips. "I know you'd rather I stay here for a bit but I'm not sure Spider-man is going to be something I can do. Not for a while, maybe not ever. You were right, I can't risk hurting someone again. But I don't want to hurt you or May. I'm not going to..." Peter's eyes flicked to the edge again. "...but I shouldn't be around anyone. It's too dangerous for them."

"I only brought you here to speak to Sam, nothing else." Tony ventured closer to the teen and he didn't move away. "I don't want you to stay anywhere but with me. I just, I didn't know what to do to help you. I thought maybe talking to me was the problem. I'm not emotionally competent and how I feel about you just clouds my judgement, like in the Gym earlier; I can't think straight. I thought with Sam you might...I don't know how to help, but I want to."

"There isn't anything you can do to help me, Mr Stark. Everyone who cares about me gets hurt, I can't let that happen to you," Peter's head hung low on his chest now. "Just...let me go."

Tony flattened at that: his stomach aching. Let him go? That would be like trying to breathe

underwater. The kid was pushing him away, but he couldn't let him do that. Peter didn't move as he wrapped his hands around his slim shoulders.

"Nope, it's not gonna happen kid. I already had to do that once and I can't do it again. Call me selfish, but you and me; we're a package deal now. You're in my very tight circle – Pep, Morgan, Rhodey and Happy. It's a full-time role, I'm afraid. But there is a benefits package. It used to be just sarcasm and endless loyalty, but since Morgan and you, it also involves hugs."

Tony pulled the kid to him and released a breath as the arms of the boy enclosed around him, squeezing tightly. He lowered his voice then; speaking into his ear.

"It doesn't matter what you do or don't do. Whether you never go out as Spider-man again or if you decide to go to - *God forbid* - Stanford. But this – *us* – will always be here."

He felt a heavy weight in his arms as Peter relaxed in his arms.

"There is nothing that we can't figure out together. Two big, stubborn brains like ours? We might not always agree but even if we don't, even if we end up shouting at each other again, I will always love you. Understand?"

He felt a definitive nod into his chest. He was tempted to stop there but he pressed on.

"Going back to live with Kevin – that's the one thing I can't allow. If it makes you feel better, think of it like this – if you're getting hurt, it hurts me. You don't want to hurt me, do you Peter?"

Peter let out a half sob. "Never."

"Well, is that settled then? That is not an option for you to be fretting over." He felt the boy nodding into his neck, and he released him a little, enough to see his face: eyes reddened and cheeks damp.

"Good, I didn't figure out time travel to let you die at the hands of that chump."

"You didn't do that for me," Peter said, brushing the tears from his cheeks with a fisted sleeve.

Tony cupped Peter's face and looked into his eyes for a beat. "Didn't I?"

Peter's eyes widened and his lips parted but he didn't say anything. Yep, he'd officially overwhelmed the kid.

"Come on, Underoos," he kept a firm grip as he led him to the stairs.

Peter

Falling asleep with Tony was something that he could get used to. Peter could feel the weight of Tony's hand as it was wrapped loosely around his forearm. Peter had fallen asleep on his chest after they'd eaten – Tony forcing him to eat even though his appetite was still small. He'd still felt shaken by the events of the day, so he'd followed Tony's lead when he'd suggested they get changed into their pyjamas and watch a film in bed with popcorn.

He'd expected Tony to slip out after he fell asleep, but it seems he had stayed all night too. He hoped it wasn't a suicide watch thing. He didn't want to hurt himself; it was just so hard to breathe when everything was such a mess. A shiver went through his body at the thought and the reaction seemed to tighten Tony's hold on his wrist. Though Peter had rolled off Tony's chest at some point – the man was like a furnace – he noticed that whenever he woke up Tony always kept something touching him. A shoulder, an arm, now a hand. It was grounding. He hadn't slept so well for months.

Tony turned onto his back then, his hand moving but not losing contact. Peter took the chance to examine the man; the lines usually evident in his brow now relaxed. The words from last night were playing through his mind. Had he really been a factor in Tony deciding to work out time travel? Had he really risked it all – Morgan and Pepper – for a chance to bring him back? It didn't make sense. Why would he for Peter Parker? He was just an unlucky kid from Queens.

But maybe he wasn't as unlucky as he thought he was. He looked back over to Tony – his chest rising and falling steadily – the sound of his heartbeat resounding in Peter's ears. The smartest man he had ever known – a certified genius – had seen something in him. The idea of disappointing him – of doing anything to hurt him – he realised that, well, that came a close second to how he felt about protecting May.

Peter's ears perked up with the sounds of movement from the communal kitchen. He heard two people moving around each other, not quite able to make out the words spoken, before one went off in the direction of the gardens. Peter used his Spider abilities to creep away from Tony's body without waking him, replacing his arm with a pillow. The man shuffled slightly but his breathing stayed even.

He made it out into the cool hallway and had zipped his hoody up over his Star Wars PJ top by the time he got to the kitchen.

Sam was up on a stool at the island, a huge bowl of cereal in front of him. He offered Peter a broad smile. "Morning Peter, you hungry?"

Peter smiled back, easing himself up onto the stool opposite Sam. "Not just yet." He looked down the hallway. "Where is Bucky?"

"He went for a run. Tried to convince me to race him, but I've had enough experience of being lapped by super soldiers to last me a lifetime."

Peter laughed at that. "How many times did they lap you?"

"I'm not answering that." He smiled as he took a sip of coffee. "I bet you would give him a run for his money though. Maybe we could have a wager..."

Peter grinned. "I dunno, I've never really tested my speed. Maybe later, when he is tired."

"Smart thinking there."

Peter looked down the hallway again. "How long does he normally run for?"

"At least an hour," Sam said, putting his cup down, almost seeming to realise a change in direction.

Peter nodded for a second and took a breath. “I’m sorry about yesterday. I didn’t mean to be rude.”

“You weren’t, really. I can imagine you might have felt a bit cornered by us.”

Peter tilted his head. “A little. Though I should have come to expect it from Tony by now.” He gave a crooked smile that Sam returned.

“I-I know that I should talk about...stuff. But I don’t know how and it’s hard for me. After my Uncle died, my Aunt, she was in a bad way, depressed, you know. I couldn’t tell her how I was feeling as she was already so freaked out and if she knew what I was going through with the spider bite and all, well, I didn’t want her to freak out more. I guess I’m saying that I got used to just dealing with stuff by myself, to protect her.”

Sam nodded like this was a normal thing.

“Now, with all this new stuff, I- I’m just tired,” Peter said, filling himself up with another breath. “I’m tired of secrets, of being afraid, of feeling so angry. I tried to forget about it...pretending isn’t working anymore.”

Sam didn’t move a muscle as the words settled into the space. Peter was glad. He might not have continued otherwise.

“I left my Aunt’s place because her husband was hitting me.” It was the first time he had said those words – the truth – out loud.

Sam didn’t look surprised, just solemn. He spoke gently. “I’m sorry you had to go through that. How long did it go on for?”

“A couple of months; until Tony figured it out.”

“You didn’t tell him?”

Peter shook his head.

“He and Clint had a hunch. Tony kind of confronted me about it. When he did, I even lied, how messed up is that,” Peter said with a dry laugh. “I might have been able to explain it away as Spider-man stuff, but he’d been at me with a belt that time, so...”

Sam clenched his cup slightly.

“How’d you feel when they found out?”

“Scared, cornered, angry.” Peter shook his head in almost disbelief. “I was really angry at them.”

“Why do you think you were?”

“I kept it a secret for so long. I didn’t want my Aunt to know – she deserves to be happy with her new family. Tony, well you saw how bad he was after the Battle, I didn’t want him to be worrying about me when he was recovering.” Peter gave a sad smile. “That kind of went out the window when he saw...everything. Then he was on me about telling my Aunt which I’ve refused to do. So I decided to just leave and he insisted I stay with him.”

“Your Aunt still doesn’t know why you left?”

Peter shook his head.

“I don’t want her to have to choose. She’s pregnant again - those kids deserve to have their family. Telling her I was leaving and not being able to give a good reason was one of the hardest things that I’ve had to do.” He blinked away a tear. “But it’s for the best.”

He waited for Sam to argue with him about that, just like Tony had, but he didn’t. It was refreshing.

“So how are you coping with it now?”

“What do you mean? The...violence...isn’t happening anymore.”

“Yeah, but you are still dealing with the emotional consequences of it, right?”

Peter nodded gently. “I think the fact that Tony dragged me down here should tell you that I’m not dealing with it very well.”

Sam shrugged.

“I went off pretty bad at this guy on patrol, I got into a fight at school when normally I’d have kept my cool and then the Morgan thing. I didn’t mean to hit her, I promise, I was having a nightmare and she tried to wake me up.”

“Nightmares – they are common?”

Peter nodded.

“Are they about your Aunt’s husband?”

Peter nodded. “Well, they get mixed up with lots of other things too but yeah. They usually end with his hand around my throat and I can’t breathe.”

Peter shuddered at the memory. Sam’s eyes were soft and he didn’t push him to talk anymore. Peter looked down at the countertop; his eyes tracing the twists of patterns in the marble as thoughts filtered through his mind.

“I don’t want to hurt myself, not like that, but I don’t want to feel like this anymore.” He turned his face up to meet Sam’s eyes. “I need help.”

Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for your well wishes on my wisdom removal - expect the story to be a lot less clever from now on 😊

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tony

Tony's foot tapped a rhythm against the floor of the car as he looked from his phone to the door of the building every few seconds.

"Geez Tone, lay off the tapping. You're worse than the kid," Happy grumbled from the front seat.

"I'll tap as much as I want, Hogan." Tony shot him a look into the rearview mirror and was greeted by a roll of the eyes from the man in front. "You roll your eyes almost as much as he does too."

Happy chuckled before his smile dropped to a serious look. He turned around in his seat then. "Peter seems like he's doing a bit better..."

Was he? Yes, Tony thought he was. Since the whole Morgan/running away incident and the trip to the Compound, something had shifted. He'd been surprised when he'd woken up that morning and found Peter and Sam at the kitchen table; the teens face peppered with drying tears. Sam had sorted out a trusted therapist in the city and Peter had been readily going for the last few weeks.

"Yeah, I think he is."

At home, Peter had started to join in more with the family. He'd been cautious with Morgan at first; not playing any kind of physical game with her. But she'd gradually worn him down and he was back to being her climbing frame on the daily. He'd been glad that Peter starting joining him in the lab— helping him with his long overdue StarkPad prototype. Though Tony would have let him work on his own Iron Man suit if it meant spending happy times with the kid. He found Peter

was more likely to open up when his hands were busy. It was starting to feel like they were getting back to the closeness that they'd had before.

"Has he been back out on patrol?" Happy asked.

"Missing your longwinded updates?"

Happy chuckled. "Maybe a little..."

Peter hadn't mentioned Spider-man and, on Pepper's orders, Tony hadn't brought it up. She'd reminded him that he might choose not to go back to it at all. That idea didn't feel right to Tony, but even he was emotionally competent enough to realise that Peter Parker needed to be ok before Spider-man could be. Peter would have to decide when he was ready to go back to it and Tony would have to wait.

"No, not yet."

Tony looked over at the building of the therapist's office. He wished he knew what was said in there. He hated not knowing everything. How could he handle everything if he didn't know? The therapist – Jan – had made it abundantly clear that she would not be breaking Peter's confidence at any time; not blinking when Tony suggested she tell him how Peter was. '*Ask him yourself*', she'd replied. As if that was easy for Peter – or, well, maybe more for himself.

The door to the building opened then, and it was Peter; his eyes training around before settling on the car. As he got to the car door, Tony could make out the red rims of his eyes, causing his stomach to quiver. Images of battering Kevin came to his mind once again, but he pushed them away.

The door opened. "Hey Hap – oh hey Tony. I thought you weren't coming to get me today." Peter eased himself into the car.

"I fancied the drive," Tony said, taking his glasses off and spinning them in his fingers.

"Uh huh," Peter said with an indulgent smile, before shifting so he was sat next to Tony.

The car pulled away and headed back towards the Tower. Peter didn't speak but looked out of the window in what Tony hoped was a comfortable silence, letting out a small yawn after a few moments. Was he not sleeping again? FRIDAY hadn't alerted him to a nightmare last night, but maybe Peter had overridden her or something. He clenched his fist, gripping the fabric of the seat. He'd check the logs when he got back.

Ask him yourself.

"So, um, how did it go?"

Tony noticed that Peter didn't tense up; his body remained loose.

"Good," he hummed before letting his head rest on Tony's shoulder. "Tiring."

It wasn't an outright dismissal, but Tony took it as a sign not to push details right now. He'd never been someone for diplomacy and delicate, emotional situations were not best handled by him. The idea that he couldn't Iron Man his way out of this still irritated him; bashing Kevin's skull in wouldn't repair the damage he'd done to Peter. He let out a sigh and let his head rest on top of Peter's.

"Yeah, it can be tiring talking about the past; about how you feel," Peter's head nodded gently against his chin. "I, uh, I had my first appointment with my therapist this morning actually."

Peter's head pulled away from under his then; wide, brown eyes meeting his. "You did?"

"Well, technically, I've seen him before, back after all the Civil War stuff, so not exactly my first time, but it's been a while."

Tony watched as Peter ducked his head and a slight pinkness came to his cheeks.

"Hey, what's going on?" Tony wasn't sure what Peter's reaction was about. He'd hoped sharing that he was talking to someone too would have made Peter feel more at ease.

Peter cleared his throat and averted his gaze. "I'm sorry...you wouldn't be doing that if I hadn't..."

the stress I've caused..."

"Woah, woah," Tony pulled Peter back into his arms with no resistance from the teen. "Sure this whole situation has triggered some old issues for me, but it's stuff I should've looked at a long time ago. It's actually going to be a good thing for me in the long run."

Peter twisted so he could see Tony's face: Peter's eyes searching his own for any insincerity. "Yeah?"

Tony nodded and let out breath. "Yeah kid, definitely."

Tony wanted to come to terms with his relationship with Howard; the good and the bad; how it affected him now. He wanted to be better than what he'd had. It wasn't something he found easy, but if he didn't try to do that, he would be doing himself, and his kids, a disservice. Breaking the cycle of shame and all that.

Peter seemed to relax into him again and Tony resumed his position with his head on top of Peter's; the kid's rib cage contracting against him reassuring him that it was the best decision he'd made in a long time.

Peter

"What is the process of transcription in relation to DNA?"

BUZZ!

"Transcription is the process by which the information in a strand of DNA is copied into a new molecule of messenger RNA (mRNA)." The words burst out of Peter.

"Yes!" MJ said.

There were a few murmurs of well-done from everyone in the room.

“Take five everyone,” MJ said to the group of exhausted looking teens.

Peter stood up and went over to where Ned was sat next to MJ.

“You are on fire today, man,” Ned punched him on the shoulder, causing him to almost spill his drink.

“Yeah, good job, loser.” MJ never failed to keep him grounded.

“Thanks, yeah, my brain is a bit clearer lately,” Peter said.

They both gave him a warm smile. Unsurprisingly, they had continued to be rocks for him after his latest freak out. No, not freak out, the last time he was ‘overwhelmed by his emotions’. God, Jan, the counsellor, was really starting to rub off on him.

“Clear of brain cells maybe,” MJ added, “you missed that easy History question.”

“Not really my area of expertise...” Peter gave her a half smile.

“Well, in that case, you know what you’re going to be cramming before the next competition.” She gave him a shit eating grin.

He bowed to her. “Yes, Captain, my Captain.”

Ned started talking about famous film lines when he pulled out his phone to see a message.

TS : Hey Kid, Pepper is still away but Rhodey is staying, so how about the three of us have some manly movie madness after Morgan hits the hay?

Peter smiled at this. A night snuggled up on the sofa with Tony would be good. Maybe this time they'd both make it through an entire film without falling asleep.

The last few weeks since the whole Morgan incident (God, he hated thinking about it) had been tough but gradually getting better. Jan was actually pretty awesome and after having admitted what had happened to Sam, he was able to talk to her quite openly and surprisingly it had helped.

She was helping him to realise that what happened to him wasn't his fault. He kind of knew that on one level, but there was always that nagging doubt – that voice in the back of his head, that said he was to blame. Sometimes it was Kevin's, but more often than not it was his own.

Actually, they'd talked a lot more about Ben than any details of the abuse, and everything that had happened since then. Jan had helped him realise that a lot of his reactions stemmed from how responsible he felt for what had happened to Ben. He wasn't sure that he'd ever feel like it was not his fault. But he could see that his need for protecting people sometimes went into overdrive. He wasn't even sure if he wanted to lose that – wasn't that what made him good at being Spider-man? But accordingly to Jan, when being Peter at least, putting others needs and wants over his own well-being, wasn't a healthy life long trait.

Challenging all the negative automatic thoughts he had about himself was hard work. Some days he felt like he was back to the old Peter and he rarely thought about it: he'd joke and giggle and feel light, looking forward to the future. On bad days, when he didn't want to think or move or try to be positive; when all he could think about was how much he missed May, but that he didn't deserve her, or anyone's, love. Those were the hardest. Letting Tony and Pepper in on those days; to allow them to comfort him had been so difficult, but it was improving. *He* was improving. And that was good enough for now; maybe one day he would feel good enough too.

He didn't quite feel ready to be Spider-man again, but for the first time since everything happened, he started to believe that there would be a time when he wanted to; where he would feel in control. A part of him couldn't wait to be swinging around; to be helping again. But for now, he was just going to be a teenager. A teenager who had movie nights with his ~~Dad~~ mentor. He shot Tony back a text:

PP : That depends: is pizza part of this negotiation?

TS : Pizza, huh?

TS : You drive a hard bargain.

TS : Fine. But some vegetables will have to go on top.

PP : Side salad instead?

TS : Deal.

TS: See you after practice, genius.

He was about to put his phone away, when it whirled in his hand.

“Time to get back to it, Parker,” MJ said, brushing her hands clean of the snack she’d been eating.

Alfie’s face flashed up as the contact.

“Just a minute,” Peter said, pressing the answer button.

The screen flickered but it was dark. He could hear sniffing.

“Alfie? You there?”

There was movement on the screen then, and Peter could see a flash of light before half of Alfie’s face came into view. The kid’s eye was squeezed shut and he started to cry softly.

“Alfie, buddy...what’s wrong?”

There was another sob and the camera moved away further. Peter saw a flash of red on Alfie’s cheek.

“Alfie, what happened?” Peter’s heart started to beat faster.

“D-daddy hit me.”

No. No. No. No.

Peter was moving without realising; frantically looking for his bag.

“Where is he now?” Peter looped his bag over his arm as he tried to keep his voice calm.

“He told me to s-stay in my room. He was so angry...” More tears spilled down his cheeks and Peter felt the casing of his phone starting to creak under the pressure of his grip.

“Stay there, ok, I’m coming now.”

Peter was almost at the door to the hall when Ned caught up to him: his dark eyes looking back at him in confusion.

“Peter, what’s-“

Peter cut him off. “Alfie’s hurt, I’ve got to go.”

Peter’s feet slapped down hard on the pavement as he sprinted to the apartment, not caring if it seemed to the whole of New York like he was enhanced. He crawled up the building and to Alfie’s room: the window was partially open, and he widened it and slipped in in one fluid motion.

Alfie was bundled in the corner, huddled into himself and he jumped up seeing Peter and they met in the middle. Alfie almost cut off his breathing; his tiny arms shaking as he gripped him around the neck.

Peter could feel Alfie’s heart hammering against his chest at almost at the same rate as his own.

“I got you. You’re okay,” Peter muttered into his hair as the boy whimpered into his shoulder.

Peter sat down on the bed and tried to pull Alfie away from him.

“I need to see where you are hurt, buddy,” Peter’s tried to keep his voice level as he gently peeled away the reluctant kid.

Peter turned Alfie’s head and could see the angry, red mark on Alfie’s face – finger marks just about evident in places. A dark feeling twisted in his stomach and he clenched the bedsheets in his hand. “Are you hurt anywhere else?”

Alfie shook his head, unleashing tears that had been pooling in his eyes. “I-I dropped my glass and he, he...” Peter watched as Alfie put his open hand to his uninjured cheek: the action or the memory causing more tears to form.

“I’m so, so sorry this happened,” — *that I let this happen* – Peter let his voice soften. “It wasn’t your fault, Alf. Not at all. Dropping something...there is nothing you could do that should mean Daddy should hit you, ever. Understand?”

Alfie’s blue eyes met his and he nodded softly.

“I need to take some photos of your face, ok buddy?”

Another nod and Peter took his phone out, snapping multiple pictures at different angles and making sure they were uploaded to his cloud. The marks were pink; they probably wouldn’t even bruise: would there even be any evidence by the time May got home?

His stomach clenched again. This was his fault. If he’d stayed, this would never have happened. If he had just listened to what everyone said and told May. He thought it was just about him being there; he never thought Kevin would have...Peter took a look at Alfie now, his thumb in his mouth as he sat curled up on his lap. How could he have been so stupid?

There was a creak outside the door and Alfie jumped; clambering back into the tight hold he had around Peter’s neck. Peter could hear movement on the other side of the door; someone moving from the back bedroom to the living area and the clink of glass.

Peter gritted his teeth so hard that he thought he might break them.

“OK Alfie, I need you to just be quiet for a moment.”

Alfie nodded into his chest as Peter pulled out his phone.

“911, what is your emergency?”

Peter cleared his throat.

“I-I need the Police. My Uncle just hit my 4 year old cousin; slapped him in the face.”

“OK, where is your location sweetie?” The operators voice was much softer now.

“3224 Greywood Apartments, Queens.”

“Is your Uncle still there? What is his name?”

“Yes. Kevin Hayes.”

“Are you somewhere safely away from him?”

“No, he could come in at any time.” Peter was suddenly aware that there was just a door between them. He could defend himself and Alfie if Kevin came in, but he didn’t want Alfie to witness that.

“Ok, try to stay out of the way. I’m dispatching Officers to the address now.”

As if by design, there was another creak from outside and Alfie’s hold tightened.

“I have to go,” Peter whispered and could hear the woman’s dissent as he pressed end on the call and slipped his phone into his pocket.

The phone vibrated instantly against his body, but he ignored it as he tilted his head to talk to the boy.

“OK, I’m going to go talk to Daddy…” Alfie’s grip tightened on his neck, but he pulled him away gently again, taking himself out of his arms completely as he stood up.

“But he’ll hurt you again!” Alfie said, causing Peter to stop. Alfie knew? Peter bit the inside of his cheek. He couldn’t think about that right now.

“I’ll be ok.” He leant forward and gave Alfie another hug. “I want you to stay in here; no matter what you hear, promise?”

Alfie gave a hesitant nod back, gripping his teddy now instead of Peter.

His hand was on the doorknob when his phone vibrated in his pocket again. He glanced at the caller ID this time; Tony. He should tell him what’s going on; he could fly down here in no time.

Peter heard the canned laughter from the TV lilt through the wood, followed by a familiar chuckle.

His jaw clenched almost painfully. He slipped the phone back into his breast pocket and opened the door. No, this was something he should have handled himself a long time ago.

Chapter End Notes

This is what I had originally written but I almost changed this to a less harsh situation for Alfie given how upset everyone was about The Starks and Peter’s decision to hold off on telling May. But then I thought no: in life people don’t always make the right call at the right time, and there are consequences 😊

Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Peter

Peter felt like all of his senses were fully vigilant; his hearing particularly finely tuned. He stood for a moment soaking it all in: the click of the door as he shut it behind him, the gurgling of the drains from upstairs, the drip of the tap from the bathroom. Then closer: the blare of the TV sitcom, the creak of the sofa and the accompanying level heartbeat of the person moving on it. He took a deep breath before he stepped out of the hallway and into the living room.

Kevin was slumped on the sofa, beer in hand, not a care in the world; like he hadn't just put his hands on a 4 year old kid.

"I told you to stay in your room," Kevin didn't even look up from his TV show; that and his bored tone riled Peter even more.

"He has."

Kevin's head spun around at the unexpected voice; his face curling into a sneer on seeing Peter.

"What are you doing here?"

"Alfie called me," Peter was surprised by the monotone sound of his own voice, when so many emotions were warring inside him.

Peter thought he saw a flash of – what? regret? – through Kevin's eyes, but it didn't stick.

"Of course he did," Kevin said with a scowl, "he thinks the sun shines out of your useless ass."

"Well, it's good for him to have at least one decent male role model," Peter shot back.

That got Kevin to his feet and Peter stepped closer. Could Kevin feel the anger radiating off of him? It felt like a ball of flames spreading over his torso and up his neck: hot enough that it should be singeing Kevin's flesh from here.

"You don't hit him," Peter pointed in the direction of Alfie's bedroom, "you hit me. I'll come over every week if that's what it takes, but you do it to me, not him, you sick fuck."

Kevin's expression morphed into the angry one: the one Peter was most used to seeing.

"What did you call me?" He stepped closer to Peter and he schooled himself to stay still; his nails pressed so tightly against his fisted palm that he felt the skin break.

"I called you a sick fuck. Want me to spell that for you, moron?"

The expected blow pitched him back into the photo display; the frames crashing down, shattering glass across the floor. The anger is still there but now there is a calmness in his body: like it knew this was what had to happen.

Peter rubbed his jaw. "Wow, that was pretty tame. Losing your touch?"

"You picked up some of that Stark mouth, have you?" Kevin's jaw clicked as he stepped towards him. Peter grinned at him and that earned him another punch in the face; his mouth filling with blood as his teeth snared his inner cheek.

"That all you got?" Peter spat out blood. "Too used to picking on little kids now, huh?"

Kevin's face was a blur as he pitched forward and slammed his fist several times into Peter's stomach. Peter couldn't help but groan as the man grabbed him and pushed him back against the shelves; his hands wrapped around his throat. Peter flailed around enough to get Kevin's hands off but he fell into the glass shelves, bringing them crashing down with him on top.

Kevin was puffing hard as he took a step back; his shoes crunching the broken glass beneath. Kevin's eyes roamed around the mess he had created.

“Look what you did, you little prick.”

“Yeah, cos it’s my fault you’re a fucking psycho,” Peter pushed out as he shifted his weight off some glass shards, his back flaring in pain.

“You little punk,” Kevin landed a kick in his side which left him gasping.

Peter looked up to see Kevin’s angry expression solidify as he searched his pockets. Peter’s eyes quickly moved to the man’s hand as Kevin flicked his wrist, extending a metal baton. Police issue.

Oh shit.

Peter saw it swing towards him and instinctively put his arm up. The metal made a dull thud as it connected but a resounding crack quickly followed. White, hot pain shot up his arm and black spots flashed in front of his eyes as he screamed and pulled his arm to his chest. He didn’t have time to look at it before the baton was crashing against his ribs. He scrambled away further onto the debris from the shelves; trying to protect his head from the blows. He felt a sharp pain in his back as he moved, but his attention was diverted to his ribs as the baton hit against them; a break again on his right side. The blows were further in-between now; Kevin was tiring, wasn’t he? Another forceful hit pushed out a mangled moan: the pain was engulfing him and he couldn’t think straight.

Peter heard the sound of snapping wood and then a familiar whirr: the hits stopped suddenly, followed by a crash a few metres away from him. He looked up enough to see Kevin in a heap on the other side of the room: the baton rolling around the floor. Tony came into view from behind the sofa then, stalking towards Kevin – *why was Tony was here?* His gauntlet was still raised and there was a look in his eyes that Peter hadn’t seen since the Battle of Earth. Tony was going to kill him.

“Mr Stark, stop.” His voice was weak; why was it weak? He couldn’t get enough air in: his mouth tasted like copper and dust.

He watched Tony get closer to the man on the floor, who was moaning lowly. Tony picked up Kevin by the shoulders; dragging the weight of his slumped body up against the wall. Peter watched as Tony slammed his fist into Kevin’s face; the impact snapping his head back against the wall with a sickening thud.

Tony was oddly quiet; no shouting, no quips; all his energy focussed on the man in his grip. Tony suddenly let the body drop to the floor before he stepped back and readied his stance, bringing the gauntlet up in front of him.

“Tony!” He managed to shout, causing him to start coughing, which in turn made his torso convulse with pain. It was enough to cause a flicker in Tony’s eyes and then he turned, his eyes widening as he saw Peter. He was by his side in a second; his eyes darting over him.

“What the fuck? Are you OK? No, you’re not. Can you get up?” Tony’s words came out a mile a minute: his face flushed and pupils dilated.

Could he? He was getting so tired and breathing hurt a lot.

“In a minute...”

“Yeah, OK, take your time kid.” Tony rubbed his left wrist with his right hand self soothingly. “Jesus, I thought I was going to have a heart attack on the way here. Why’d you aggravate him like that?”

Peter’s confusion must have shown as Tony clarified; “I pushed the call through; I could hear everything...”

“That will teach you to be nosey,” Peter managed to puff out.

The quip didn’t land like he wanted it to as Tony’s expression softened; “You don’t need to be brave now, Pete.”

Tony gently pushed his hand through Peter’s hair. Peter went to bat him away, like he often did, forgetting his injured wrist; the throaty yelp he let out sending Tony’s eyebrows high up his forehead.

“Your wrist - think it’s broken?” Tony had the sense not to try to touch it from where Peter had clutched it back to his chest.

“Yeah.” Peter started to feel a bit lightheaded.

“Where else is bad? And none of this usual downplaying shit, I can’t deal with that now.” Tony’s eyes were dark and serious.

Before he could answer, he heard boots outside the apartment.

“POLICE!”

Peter raised his head enough to see two NYPD officers with their guns pointed, taking in the scene.

“You, with the robot arm, get away from the boy. Hands behind your head.”

Tony did as the man said, backing up towards them, the gauntlet still on one hand.

“He’s not hurting me, he’s helping,” Peter gasped as the Police officers came closer.

“Shit, it’s Iron Man,” one of the officers exclaimed upon edging closer.

“Yeah, hi, Tony Stark here.” Tony flashed them one of his patented smiles, but his eyes were still serious. “Look if you’ll let me, I can lower my arm, press a button and the robot arm situation, whatever you want to call it, goes away.”

“Yeah, yeah ok,” the elder, male officer said nervously, not lowering his weapon an inch.

Tony moved slowly and did what he said: the nanites retracting into his watch interface seamlessly.

Peter heard the other female officer start talking into her radio, as the older one came and knelt by him.

“Who hurt you kid?”

“Him,” Peter pointed with his uninjured arm. ”Kevin Hayes.”

“He’s one of yours,” Tony added, from his position. “Think he took the meaning of ‘taking your work home with you’ too literally.” Tony pointed to the baton on the floor.

The female officer went over and nudged it with her foot before shooting a wary look at her partner.

“Where is the little boy?” The elder officer asked.

“My little cousin – he’s in the bedroom – Kevin hit him.” Peter pushed another dry cough out as the female Police officer went cautiously into the room.

Another set of police officers came through the door then, followed by Happy.

“You can’t come in here sir,” The older Policeman said.

“He’s with me. He’s my security,” Tony said.

“Asset Manager,” Peter choked out.

Happy’s eyes caught Peter’s; a mix of love and pain in them. “Kid,” he breathed.

“Happy call Dr Cho and have her ready. And call May,” Tony said and Happy returned a nod, stepping back outside. “Can I go to my kid now?” Tony pointed over to Peter while looking at the older officer.

The cop must have nodded as next thing Peter knew Tony was next to him, his hand lightly on his shoulder.

“How are you doing?”

Peter didn't respond as he gulped through the pain. There was something digging into his back and it was getting hard to ignore. He could hear more thundering footsteps coming up the apartment block staircase. He tried to shift his weight to get the pain to ease and there was a flash of pain followed by relief and then his breath was getting shorter.

“Pete,” Tony was looking at him; his eyes full of worry. He didn't want Tony to worry about him. Tony was so good; he should have a life full of light, he deserved that after everything he'd been through. He shouldn't be here, dealing with the mistakes of a 16-year-old.

“What the - “ Tony's voice stopped and Peter watched as he brought up his hand, covered in blood. Where had that blood come from? Did Kevin hurt Tony? He watched Tony lean over his body, looking behind him, his eyes widening at whatever he saw.

Breathing was getting even harder. If he slept, he would heal, right? He just needed to sleep.

“Pete, look at me buddy.” He could make out the hitching of Tony's heartbeat: the sound growing increasingly fast in his ears.

Tony's warm hand was on his cheek; it felt nice. He flicked his eyes to Tony – God, his eyes felt so heavy.

Tony's hand was tapping on his cheek now.

“Hey, Pete, buddy, eyes open, stay with me, ok?”

The need for sleep was too much for him to contend with. He tried to smile reassuringly at Tony but judging by his face, it didn't work, but he couldn't hold on any longer.

“I - I'm sorry.”

drops this chapter and runs away

Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tony

Tony's knee was damp. It took him a few seconds to realise it was Peter's blood seeping through his trouser leg before the EMTs arrived and immediately flocked to Peter. Happy pulled him up and away, and he wasn't sure if he was resisting, or if Happy had an arm around his chest to stop him falling down. He didn't take his eyes off Peter, as much as he could see him with the EMTs surrounding him. There were so many people in the small apartment now; two crews of EMTs, two sets of Police Officers. Noise all around but it was like he couldn't hear anything: his only focus was Peter, whose eyes are still closed atop his battered face. Happy pressed them back against the wall as they stretchered Peter out. Tony pulled himself out of Happy's arms to follow down the stairs and out to the ambulance: hovering as they manoeuvred Peter into the van.

Tony went to step in but a female EMT stood in front of him speaking and he took his eyes off Peter for a second to be able to hear her.

"Sir, are you family?"

"Yes, he's my son." He would say anything to stay close to Peter right now, but those words don't sound like a lie.

As the vehicle started to move, the EMT swarmed over Peter, so Tony couldn't touch him but he was at least there. She called ahead to the hospital – saying things like '*potential perforated lung*', '*multiple broken bones*'; all the things he didn't want to hear said about this kid that he loves so much. He wished he could change places with him; to go back in time and actually kill Kevin like he'd imagined so many times.

The EMT shifted to the other side of the truck and Tony could see Peter's face for a moment. His eyes are closed, his breathing short and if it wasn't for the blood, he would look almost peaceful. *The blood.* Tony tried not to look at it, but it's everywhere.

Tony noticed his own hands and they are imprinted with the same; stained ruby red, etched into the lines in his skin and deep under his fingernails. Is this worse than the dust?

His throat is so tight then that he isn't sure he can breathe himself; a dull, but growing ache blooming in his left arm. It feels like the start of every panic attack he has ever had, but there is no space for that in this tin can and no place for it right now, not that that factor has ever held influence over his attacks. He tried to ground himself but all the sights are medical equipment and wads of bloody gauze; the sounds are only the wailing siren and the thumping of his own heart filling his ears; the only smells he can latch on to are sweat and the unrelenting tang of copper.

Thankfully the ride was short: the EMT practically tumbles him out of way and onto the concrete in front of the hospital. He just stood there pulling in the fresh air and uselessly watching them as they pull the stretcher out of the ambulance.

Happy is there by his side again, talking to him. How did he manage to get there so quickly? Did he have a suit? He should really make Happy a suit. Happy is still talking but he feels like he is underwater.

Suddenly there is a burst of pain through his cheek and he catches his breath.

"Snap out of it Tony!" Happy is glaring at him; but there is no fire there.

"Did you just slap me, Hogan?"

"Yes, and I'll do it again. Get with it. Peter needs you."

"I...I..." Tony shakes his head: breathing still not steady. Happy grabs him by the shoulders.

"You are Tony, fucking, Stark, get your shit together for your kid, NOW." Happy's eyes are ablaze and that, combined with his words, seemed to restart Tony.

He straightened up and headed in the direction that Peter's gurney went; Happy striding alongside him. Peter had been taken into a trauma room.

"Sorry sir, you can't come in here." A nondescript nurse was in front of him; scrubs covering her.

“That’s my kid.”

“Sorry sir, hospital personnel only. He’s in good hands.”

Tony gritted his teeth but didn’t move any further. There were windows to one side and he spoke to Happy; keeping his eyes firmly on Peter.

“Where is Cho?”

“She’s on the Quinjet with some of her staff; ten minutes out. She knows it’s Peter and his special circumstances...”

“But,” Tony interrupted, “we need to get him out of here and to the Compound as soon as he is stable.”

Tony didn’t let himself think for a moment that Peter wouldn’t become stable. Just believe that he will be alright and work to that outcome unless told otherwise. Peter’s identity being kept secret was important to him. If he was here for more than a few hours, they would likely notice his healing factor and then, with the Police around, it might get tricky.

“They won’t let him us move him without a guardian’s consent. Did you get through to May?”

“Yes – she was at work. I told her that Peter and Kevin had been hurt and to get over here pronto. She’s in a cab now.”

“Alfie?” Tony knew Peter would want to know where he was as soon as he woke.

“They wouldn’t let me take him. Police have him and likely they’ll bring him here. I also rang Pepper, she’s flying back from Chicago now. Rhodes is set to stay with Morgan.”

“OK. OK.” Tony breathed out knowing all the wheels were in motion. He tensed then as he saw through the window that they were moving Peter again; out through a side door of the trauma room. He moved into a run until he rounded a corner and into the corridor that the gurney was now being pushed down. He caught up with it and he could hear Happy coming up behind him.

“What’s going on?” Tony asked a harried Nurse who was at the head of Peter’s bed. His face was deathly pale with an almost blue tinge. She didn’t break stride.

“His breathing is too laboured and we think that is due to a shard of glass perforating his lung. We are prepping for emergency surgery now. He’s a minor?”

“16, yes.”

“Are you his guardian? We’d prefer permission to operate.”

His hand was automatically typing into his phone.

“Tony?” Her voice sounded so hollow; as if she was expecting a call to say that he had gone.

“May, Peter needs emergency surgery. The Nurse needs a guardian’s permission to treat him. I’m going to pass you over.”

They walked down the corridor and into the lift, just enough room for all the staff and the two of them, as the Nurse explained to May what was happening. Tony took the chance to shift closer to Peter, who was still passed out, looking barely alive. Bruises visible around his neck and all over the parts of his torso that weren’t hidden with blood: his t-shirt long since cut off. Tony stroked his arm, finding his pulse point; weak, but there.

“I’m here buddy, I’m here,” he whispered.

“Boss?”

Tony looked up from where his head was hung in his hands.

Happy stuck out a plastic cup of brown water which Tony took instinctively; frowning into it before looking back up at Happy in disgust. Happy shrugged in return and sat down heavily in the chair next to him.

The OR waiting room was a drab space full of muted, pastel coloured chairs and boxes of tissues randomly placed on side tables, next to weathered magazines. Tony hated it passionately.

Dr Cho had arrived and brought her credentials so she was able to get into the OR under the guise of Peter having unusual allergies to painkillers; she had brought the only stuff they had that might work for him. Tony's teeth clenched at the thought of it not working and him waking up on the table in pain. Even if anyone was suspicious, Happy had gotten them all to sign NDA's on his StarkPad. They should be okay until they managed to get him back to the Compound.

"Mr Tony!"

Tony turned towards the corridor to see Alfie wrestling himself out of a Police Officer's hand and running towards him. Tony had just enough time to get up and bend down before the little boy threw himself into his arms. The sobs radiated through the tiny body and Tony took a steadying breath as he stroked a hand through his hair.

"Shhh, it's okay buddy. It's ok."

The Police Officer watched at a polite distance as Tony comforted him; slipping back into the chair with Alfie like a limpet in his arms.

Alfie pulled back and a tissue appeared from Happy which Tony took, quickly wiping Alfie's face and nose.

Tony could see a flash of pink on his cheek and gently tilted his head to the side: gritting his teeth as he could make out the outline of several fingers.

Tony stuck his chin out in the direction of the Police Officer. "You take plenty of photos of this?"

The Police Officer shifted, looking uneasy; "Waiting on the mother."

Tony huffed. He didn't trust these guys wouldn't be trying to side with one of their own.

"Hey Alfie, you mind if I take some photos of you?"

Alfie looked a little shy. "Petey already did."

Tony stalled at that. Peter had calmed himself enough to gather evidence before he'd gone after Kevin. Tony envied the level of self-control he had to have had to do that.

Two more Police officers arrived and started talking in quiet voices with the other one.

"Where's Peter?" Alfie's voice quivered.

Tony made sure to make eye contact: Alfie's blue eyes full of worry.

"The Doctors are looking after him now. Don't worry."

"Mr Stark?" Two of the Police Officers stepped forward. "We need to take your statement."

Tony looked down at the kid on his lap and then back up at them with an eyebrow raised. "I'll do that when his mother arrives."

One Police Officer looked like he was going to protest, but Tony maintained his steely glare until he thought better of it and turned around.

At a burst of noise from behind, Tony craned his head to see May running into the waiting room; her dark hair a mess and the bump of her belly evident through her purple scrubs.

"Mommy!"

Alfie leapt off Tony's lap and May was almost across the room before they met in the middle; a crush of limbs, whimpers and soft assurances. Tony saw May's eyes widen in horror and confusion as she turned Alfie's face and looked at his cheek. Tony could see tears in them too as she looked up at his approach with so many questions on her face.

"He's still in surgery. Dr Cho is with him. When he's stable, we need to move him to the Compound – to hide his... the hospital won't without your agreement." Tony kept his voice low as May nodded back, her eyes looking vacant.

She looked like she was about to speak when they were interrupted by the Police Officers.

"Mrs Hayes, can you come with us please?"

May clutched Alfie a little tighter before she followed the Police Officers down the corridor.

Happy was next to Tony; "I'll stay close by, in case she needs anything. Call me if you hear anything about the kid."

"I will. Thanks, Hap."

Tony watched the man discard his plastic coffee cup before hurrying in the same direction.

—

The sounds of the machines beating a steady rhythm helped to calm Tony's own heart.

Peter had been out of surgery for half an hour. Dr Cho reported that the surgeon's had removed the glass and repaired the punctured lung. His healing was already evident internally so she wasn't worried, but warned him that the significant blood loss could slow it down. Several ribs were broken and a few more bruised. His forearm had been snapped and it'd been reset and cast; the red covering standing out against the white sheets of the bed.

Tony had called Pepper, Happy and Rhodey to let them know that Pete was out of the woods.

Though the immediate danger had gone; Tony still felt like his adrenaline was spiked. Sitting still by the bedside was almost impossible; he paced by the windows; looking out over the buildings below as evening drew over Queens.

May had been with the Police for well over an hour. Another set of Officers had taken his statement and he had told them truthfully what he knew.

A slight movement from the bed had him standing. Peter's eyes were starting to flit open. Shit, he shouldn't be awake yet: Tony pressed the call button for Cho.

"Pete, hey buddy, it's me, Tony."

Peter's eyes settled on him and gave a half smile/half wince.

"Tony..." There was a warm current to his dry voice. Dr Cho must have given him the good stuff.

"Are you in pain?" Tony touched his hand gently to Peter's shoulder and he didn't seem to notice or mind.

"Feel floaty."

Tony cracked a smile. "Dr Cho dosed you up."

A smile drifted on his face as his eyes closed for a second. "She's nice."

"Yeah she is."

Peter's eyes suddenly popped open again and the monitor beeped faster next to him.

"Alfie?"

“He’s safe. He’s with May: they’re talking to the Police.”

The beeping slowed slightly but there was a look of confusion on his face.

Tony rubbed his knuckles gently against the side of Peter’s uninjured cheek. “You remember what happened?”

“Yeah,” Peter said, still sleepily, “but why were you there?”

“Ned called me.”

“I love Ned.”

Tony chuckled. “Me too. After this, I might even stop pretending I don’t know his name.”

“He would love that.” There was that soppy grin again.

There was a pause and he thought Peter might have gone back to sleep.

“May’s with the Police? Did you...is he...alive?”

Tony’s jaw set. “Unfortunately. Don’t think about him right now. I just want you to focus on getting better.”

“Ok. Look after May, Alf...I’m tired...” Peter’s body relaxed and Tony stayed, stroking a hand through his hair as his breathing levelled out.

Cho had been horrified that Peter had been awake already and promptly topped up his meds. It wasn’t long after that May came in.

She didn't acknowledge Tony, just came and stood close to Peter's bed; her eyes darting all over his body as her arms wrapped tighter around herself. After a moment, she reached out a hand and tentatively stroked his cheek. Peter let out a deeper breath, but didn't stir.

"He was awake for like 2 minutes, then he went back to sleep. Not in any pain," Tony said.

She nodded but still didn't talk to him.

"I'll let you have some time alone with him." Tony stood, sensing she wanted privacy.

"Kevin said that Peter hit him first." May's voice was tight. Tony squared back around to her. He couldn't believe the audacity of this guy, but before he could speak, she continued; "He's lying."

"Yes," Tony said firmly.

May nodded at this. "I told him that after what he did to Alfie, if Peter had hit him first, he wouldn't have been getting back up."

May paused again, both of them silently watching the rise and fall of his chest.

"That is why he left. It wasn't the first time." The realisation in her voice was almost painful to hear.

Tony stayed quiet, which he knew would be confirmation enough.

He could see a million thoughts and feelings running over her features. She threw her head back and pressed her eyes together: a tear running down her cheek that she quickly wiped away. Her head snapped around and he was suddenly on the receiving end of her very angry expression.

"You knew. You knew, and you didn't tell me!"

Tony put his hands up as if would stop the rage that was pouring from her. He backed up a step as she came forward.

“May, I tried...”

“You *tried*? I asked you point blank why he left, more than once, and you just decided to lie to me?” May’s face was bright red now: her eyes lit up like explosives.

“I tried, really, I did, but he was adamant that he didn’t want to split the family up.”

“He is a CHILD!” May’s fingers stabbed in Peter’s direction. “You should have told me the minute he came to you.”

“M-May,” Tony stuttered: he wanted to find to the right words to explain how it had gone down; why it happened that way, but here, now, with Peter bruised and broken a foot away: the words just felt hollow.

“If you had told me; this wouldn’t have happened.” She waved in the direction of Peter’s still sleeping form. “Alfie wouldn’t have...”

She looked up at him then; her eyes full of hurt and confusion before setting into a hardened glare. “Get out.”

Tony gaped at her. “But May...please...”

“Get out!” She shouted: stepping towards him; her rounded belly thrust forward and her trembling fists, tight with rage. “Get out and don’t come back.”

Tony stumbled back and out of the door as if she had pushed him. The bright strip lights of the hallway assaulted his eyes but they weren’t the reason why tears were stinging his eyes. She couldn’t mean that. Not really. She wouldn’t keep him from Peter, would she?

He pushed off the wall and his shaky legs took him down to the elevator. He ignored the looks of recognition: he needed fresh air; his breaths starting to become ragged.

His mind continued to spin. May could keep him away; he had no legal rights to Peter; no claim. If she said Tony couldn't see him, now or in the future, there wasn't a damn thing he could do about it.

He shot out of the elevator as soon as the doors opened and sped walked as fast as possible to the main doors. The cool air hit his face, but it did little to help.

"Tony!"

He looked up and Pepper was there, dressed in her business suit; concern plastered all over her face. He grabbed onto her as soon as she was near enough; breathing in her familiar scent as he pressed his face into her neck.

"Tony," Pepper's voice sounded uncharacteristically panicked. "Did something happen? I thought he was stable."

Tony pulled away; seeing her eyes filled with worry. "No, Pete, he's fine. Well not fine, actually pretty bad, but he should be fine, with time."

Her faced relaxed slightly.

"May, um, May is with him." Tony cleared his throat. "She just found out about everything."

Pepper's jaw clenched and he could see the guilt filter through her eyes in the same way he figured it must in his.

"She told me to get out."

"What?" Pepper's expression changed to one of fear.

"She told me to get out and not come back and I- I don't think I blame her, Pep."

May was right, wasn't she? They could have stopped this ever happening.

Tears filled Pepper's eyes as she simply nodded in return, a shared comprehension, before she wrapped her arms around him and started to sob into his neck.

Chapter End Notes

Meh, not so sure about how this chapter came out

Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Peter

The beeping of the machines was what pulled him out of the foggy, dreamless state he'd been in. Peter knew he was in the hospital; vaguely remembered talking to Tony before and finding out that Alfie was safe and Tony wasn't hurt.

He heard movement in the room and opened his eyes gradually, squinting against the harsh light. Once he adjusted to the brightness, he was elevated enough that he could make out the room and, more importantly, what the hell was going on with his body. There were wires coming out of him. He could feel the IV in his left vein and the heaviness of his other arm made him look down and see it was wrapped in a red cast. He could feel something was attached to his side and instinctively knew it was something he probably shouldn't touch, and didn't much want to look at.

He could see the back of May and Dr Cho from where they were across the room.

"We really are getting to that time where we need to move him, Mrs Hayes," Dr Cho said.

"Please, call me May." May's voice sounded strained.

"May," Dr Cho's voice was warm; like when she tried to convince him to have painkillers when she stitched him up. "The drains need to come out now – his body is trying to heal over them. It's getting harder to keep the other staff out without it looking suspicious. We need to move him to the Compound."

May seemed to tense at that. "I – I'm not sure about that..."

Dr Cho seemed to tense too. "May, I know this is a difficult situation..."

Dr Cho was speaking quietly, even for his hearing, and Peter bent forward to better hear, when a shot of pain went through his ribs. He must have made a sound as they both turned around.

“Peter, sweetheart, are you hurting?” May was by his side and even as he breathed through the burst of pain, he could see how exhausted she looked.

Dr Cho was on his other side, a wrinkle furrowing her usually unflappable brow.

“Just my ribs, moved a bit too quickly, I think.”

Neither of their faces changed much from anything other than concern.

“Pain anywhere else?” Dr Cho asked, looking professional.

He didn’t want to say ‘generally all over’ as it wasn’t too bad; just an underlying ache and heaviness: like moving would take a lot of energy.

“Not really,” he went with.

Dr Cho turned to look at the machines next to him. His attention was drawn by May who stroked a piece of his hair out of his eyes and smiled at him with warm concern.

Peter expected Tony to be there. Maybe he’d gone to get some food or something; no light was coming through the blinds, but he had no idea what time it even was.

“Where’s Tony?”

May flinched slightly at the question and continued stroking his hair but didn’t respond.

“What’s going on?” Peter looked at May, who was looking just past his eyes at the bed behind. Maybe Tony hadn’t been telling him the truth earlier. “Is-is he hurt? Did Kevin...”

“No, honey, Tony’s fine.” Her pronunciation of ‘Tony’ was tight: like it cost her to say his name.

Shit, maybe Tony didn't want to be here anymore. Maybe he'd realised that Peter was too much trouble after all. Peter wouldn't blame him after today; let alone the last few weeks.

"Is he...he's mad at me...about today...that's why he's not here?" The heart rate monitor started to beep faster.

Peter saw Dr Cho giving May a look from the side of her eye.

"Tony's not mad at you, honey," May sighed, running what he presumed was meant to be a comforting hand along his shoulder. "I told him to leave."

"Told him to...why would you do that?"

No answer again. A shiver went through him: something was wrong.

"May..."

"Now is not the time to talk about all this sweetie." May crossed her arms, resting them on her belly, like what she had said was such an easy, obvious thing to do.

"May; why can't he be here?" She didn't even look at him this time; like what he thought didn't matter. "You're being ridiculous!"

"Ridiculous?! He didn't tell me that my son was being beaten up by my own husband, so no, he doesn't get to be in here," May snapped with such force that Peter winced before collecting himself.

"May, it wasn't his fault, ok? I begged him; threatened him even. I *made* him not tell you. It was on me."

"Peter, you are a child. None of this is on you. Tony should've told me – that wasn't his decision to make," May said sternly. "Now sit back before you tear something."

Normally that tone would have worked on him. It was her no-nonsense voice. But this was different. Peter pushed on; “When can I see him?”

“Peter, I’m not discussing this with you right now, sit back.”

“May! You don’t understand. I want to see him. I need to.” Fear started to spread: a clenching of the muscles in his back; hitching of his shoulder blades.

“No, you don’t, and you won’t. I can’t trust him, so he doesn’t get to see you.”

“What? *Ever?*” Peter shouted.

Dr Cho intervened. “Peter, your heartrate is too high, you need to calm down. Do you understand?”

Peter ignored her and turned back to May; clasping her hand in his one good one.

“You don’t understand. Without him I would’ve been long gone. I did runaway; but he brought me back.” May’s frown deepened. “He and Pepper they helped me. They’re my family too; I need them.”

He could hear the desperation in his voice: he sounded almost unhinged.

“I’m so, so sorry about what happened. That will never happen again, Kevin will never be near us.” May tried to place her hands on his cheeks but he shied away. “I’m your family Peter. Me and Alfie. We don’t need anyone else.”

All Peter could think was that she was wrong. More wrong that she had ever been about anything. He needed Tony and Pepper; he wanted them. He couldn’t imagine them not being in his life. The panic he felt at that thought was almost palpable.

If he could just get to Tony, he would sort it all out. Peter grabbed the wire and ripped the IV from

his arm.

Tony

Tony had been back in the 'waiting room of doom' for an hour now. The décor was no less uninspiring. He shifted in his seat; his behind getting pretty numb now with the weight of a four-year-old on top of him for so long. Tony tried to crane his neck around to see if the kid was actually watching the phone in his lap.

"He's out," Happy supplied from where he sat across the aisle; rubbing his eyes as he sat up.

"He wasn't the only one getting his beauty sleep." Happy had nodded off not long after he was relieved of babysitting duties.

Happy coloured. "It's been a long day."

Tony didn't disagree. "A long month you mean," he muttered under his breath.

As soon as they had come back upstairs, Pepper had taken Alfie off to get some food and then, when they had come back, he'd chosen Tony's lap as the place to reside.

Tony looked down at the little boy; the marks on his face had already calmed down a lot, though knowing that still didn't lessen the guilt that was consuming him now. The kid must have heard everything that had happened in that apartment today. He could only hope that the Police had had the foresight to cover his eyes so he couldn't see the mess of blood and glass on the way out.

Tony ran a hand through the boy's blond curls, feeling the heat from his scalp radiate into his palm. He wished he was in with Peter, doing the same to his unruly mop.

"So, what are you doing out here?"

Tony looked up sharply at Happy.

“What’s it look like? Looking after Alfie.”

“No, that’s what I was doing.” Happy gave him his patented unimpressed look.

Tony huffed out a breath and looked out across the room. “May told me to get out.”

Happy’s forehead crumpled. “She did, huh?”

“Yep, told me not to come back either.”

“But you are still here.”

“Well, I’m seeing this room as purgatory and maybe she’ll forgive me, and I’ll get to go back in.”

Happy sat back with a grimace but said nothing. Tony found he was wanting his opinion for once.

“You’ve been around for a lot, Hogan. You ever known me to fuck up as bad as this?”

Happy’s eyebrows raised. The man had been through a lot with him and truthfully, Tony didn’t know what he would do without him.

Happy didn’t answer that question in any detail; which was probably wise.

“She’ll come around.”

Tony thought back to the look in May’s eyes. In his lifetime, he had gotten used to being looked on with hate, anger and disappointment. But the way May had looked at him...that one would stick.

“I don’t think so, Hap.” Tony gulped down the growing lump in his throat. “I’m not sure she is going to forgive me for not telling her.”

A serious look came over Happy’s features; also tinged with a hint of guilt. Tony was reminded that he hadn’t been the only one who’d been keeping Peter’s secret.

“Make her understand, Tony.”

He started to protest but Happy continued: “That kid needs you now, more than ever. Hell, May is going to need you and Pep too.”

Tony grunted. “We’ll be lucky if she ever talks to us again.”

“Tony, you don’t get it. You can’t let her isolate herself. She has no family and not a lot of friends, not since she got with him. She dropped her hobbies, rarely goes out. Peter isn’t the only one Kevin did a number on.”

Tony hadn’t had time to consider much about Kevin and May’s relationship. “You don’t think he hurt her?”

Happy shook his head. “Not in that way, but he had her on a pretty tight rein, not that I think she even realises that.”

Controlling. That fitted. Tony tilted his head. “You seem to have a lot more information than a simple hunch there, Hap.”

Happy shrugged. “We used to meet up for coffee, y’know, after... I’d come by the apartment and check on her.” Happy’s face started to redden a little as Tony tried not to smile at the obvious soft spot that was there. “You told me to look out for her, that’s all I was doing. She was missing the kid, liked talking about him with someone who knew him a bit.”

Tony put his hands up in surrender. He was glad his old friend had been able to do something that, at the time, he didn’t have the guts for. Tony could imagine them having conversations about Peter’s antics: May not being the only one who missed the kid. Happy would probably never

admit as much but, if you knew him, his love for Peter was obvious.

“Anyway, she was all lovestruck after she met the guy; thought the sun shone out his ass. Alfie happened pretty quick and so did the marriage. He didn’t like me turning up at their place – he made that abundantly clear – so we’d meet at the hospital on her lunchbreaks sometimes.”

Happy took a breath. Tony wasn’t used to the man talking so much at once.

“All I’m saying is you’ve got to get right with her about it. Make her understand why you didn’t tell her. With everything, she is going to need you – all of us.”

Tony considered all this. He’d have to try to get her to listen – to at least understand his reasoning, even if she disagreed. He needed to see Peter and he knew Peter needed him; she would get that, wouldn’t she?

Tony palmed off a still sleeping Alfie onto Happy after a while, so could feel his ass cheeks again and finally go to the bathroom. He found Pepper on the phone at the end of the hallway and gave her a quick squeeze and a kiss on the cheek before making his way back to the waiting room. He’d started to leaf through one of the depressing looking magazines when a very harassed Dr Cho came running into the room.

“Tony, I need you, now.”

Tony rushed over to her and followed her at pace.

“What happened?”

“He woke up and you weren’t there. May told him you weren’t allowed to see him anymore. He’s well, freaking out, trying to get out the room. I can’t get close enough to give him something to calm him down. He’s injured but he’s still strong.”

Tony hurried. If Peter accidentally hurt May, there was no way he'd ever forgive himself. Tony could hear the shouts as they neared the door.

"Move May, let me past." Peter's voice carried through.

"You need to get back in bed...no, honey get down from there."

Tony pushed open the door and took in the sight in front of him.

The bed was knocked to the side, the IV stand was on the ground and the drain that had been in Peter's side was laying on its side on the floor, fluid leaking out. May was stood blocking the doorway and Peter was on the ceiling, trails of blood coming from his side and arm.

"Pete!"

Peter turned to see him and immediately jumped down from the ceiling and launched himself into Tony's arms.

Tony could feel him trembling under his hands. "T-Tony," Peter hiccupped into his chest.

"What are you doing out of bed Spiderling?" Tony kept his voice calm as he rubbed soothing circles on Peter's back.

"She said I couldn't see you...she..." A huge wave of tears cut him off.

Over Peter's head, Tony caught May's eyes. She looked absolutely petrified.

Tony started to shuffle him slowly back towards the bed. He could see Dr Cho hovering with a syringe nearby and he gave her a short, sharp shake of the head.

"Shush now, come on buddy, we need to get you hooked back up."

Mention of it seemed to clue in Peter's body that it was in fact injured, and he suddenly crumpled: his full weight suddenly in Tony's arms. Tony let out a startled sound and took a step back with the force of it.

May stepped forward, arms outreached to help but he stopped her. "It's ok, I've got him, May. Be careful of the baby."

May seemed to suddenly realise this and retreated.

"I'm so sorry. I tried to tell her it wasn't your fault; it was mine, but she won't listen." Peter mumbled into his ear as Tony manhandled him as gently as possible into the bed.

"None of this is your fault buddy," Tony said gently as he got him into the bed. Peter moaned lowly at the movement and his uninjured arm curled around the broken ribs on his right side. Tony could hear May take in a wavering breath.

"It is; it is." Peter's eyes were almost glazed, and Tony wasn't sure if it was the pain, the stress or the afterglow of the drugs in his system.

"Dr Cho is going to give you something for the pain so she can get you hooked back up to everything without hurting you further."

Peter looked like he was going to protest but then just nodded. He must have hurt himself moving around like that only a few hours after surgery.

Dr Cho took that as her call sign and approached with the syringe. "Just a quick prick."

Peter barely registered her injecting him, just let out a breath.

"I can still see you Tony, can't I?"

Tony stood back to let Dr Cho hook up the heart monitor.

“That’s not up to me buddy. Whatever May decides,” Tony said, and could see May shift her weight next to him.

“You said if she knew, everything would be alright...but it’s not. It’s not alright...” His words started to slur as his body relaxed.

“We’ll sort it out, Roo. Just rest.” Tony brushed his hands through the kid’s matted hair and Peter’s eyes closed moments later.

“Tony, I need to...”. Dr Cho was bustling around the bed and Tony moved out of the way.

May was stood with her arms wrapped around herself just staring at Peter.

“May, I need you to make a decision on moving him,” Dr Cho said, looking directly at her before shooting a concerned look to Tony.

May was considering not letting them treat him at the Compound? No, she had to. What was she thinking? She knew how important it is to Peter to keep his enhancements quiet. Tony bit back the urge to fight. He needed to tread carefully – Peter wasn’t the only one who was vulnerable right now.

“If this is going to be a discussion, can I ask you to take it somewhere else? I need Peter and this mess tidied up and I don’t want any chance he might get agitated again.”

May nodded and headed for the door and Tony followed behind.

As soon as they stepped out, Pepper was there, obviously waiting: her eyes lined with worry.

“Is he ok?” Pepper searched both of their faces. May didn’t say anything and just looked to the ground; her fingers pressing white marks into her arms.

“Yes, just a little het up. Cho has got him now.”

Pepper turned her attention to May. “How are you doing? This must all be such a shock for you.”

That probably wasn’t the best choice of words. *A shock for you because you were the only one of us that didn’t know.*

An angry look washed through May’s face before it was replaced with something else. She suddenly seemed to stumble and both he and Pepper managed to grab her arms and get her into a nearby chair.

A sob and shortened breath came next and Pepper crouched in front of her, holding her hands as Tony ran and grabbed a cup of water for her.

They both hovered as May took a sip of water followed by a shaky breath.

“Better?”

May nodded. “Just a bit unsteady...I – I don’t think I’ve eaten since this morning.”

Pepper stood up. “I’ll get you something.”

“I’m fine.”

“May, please.” Pepper’s eyes implored her to let her do this simple thing and after a beat May nodded gently.

Pepper took off down the corridor and Tony internally cursed her for potentially leaving him to face the wrath of May alone again.

He slipped into the seat next to her. His phone purred and he slipped it out.

Cho: *We need to move him to the Compound asap. What’s going on?*

Even Dr Cho had the sense not to venture outside and have this conversation with the two of them in person.

“Look, May,” Tony started; not really wanting to break the silence but knowing he had to. “If your concern about moving him to the Compound is because of me...I promise I’ll stay away, if that’s what you want. You’ll have full control of the room. But the staff here will notice his special abilities if we are here much longer and you know that’s not what he wants.”

May didn’t say anything to that and just looked ahead. After a moment, she crumpled up the paper cup and sat back.

“Ok,” she said, closing her eyes. It didn’t answer the question as to whether he could see Peter, but at least he would be going somewhere where he’d get the best care.

Tony tapped out a ‘*good to go*’ message to Dr Cho. She would sort out the travel and the staff at the other end. He followed it up with a message to Sam and Bucky letting them know that there would be visitors to the Compound tonight and to ask them to make sure a guest room was ready for May and Alfie.

When he had done that, May was still in the same position; her hands trembling as they lay on the arm rests. This amount of stress was not good in her condition. She looked tired and thin – her bump the only exception. Peter hadn’t been lying when he said she wasn’t well with the pregnancy. She looked so frail that Tony could see where Peter’s motivation to not tell her came from.

Tony would respect her wishes if she didn’t want him seeing Peter, but it was plain to see from what had just happened that her enforcing that would drive a wedge between her and Peter faster than Kevin ever did. More so, it would hurt Peter at a time when he needed support from all corners. He just had to hope that, in time, she would see that.

Tony side eyed May again from where she hadn’t moved. Tony knew this was his moment to talk; to maybe get her to understand. He just had to find the right words to say.

“He didn’t come to me.”

May opened her eyes and turned to him.

“What?” she croaked.

“You said earlier, that I should’ve told you when he first came to me about Kevin, but the truth is, that he didn’t come to me. He never told me. When I found out and confronted him, his exact words were; *‘if I wanted you to know, I would have told you.’* Tony remembered the night outside the apartment and the cold look that Peter had given him: a look he’d never had from the kid before. “Clint had a feeling and, long story short, we figured it out from there.”

“How?!” May looked at her hands and back up again. “It was happening in my own house for god knows how long and I didn’t have a clue. How did you?”

“Personal experience,” Tony pushed out.

Her brows furrowed deeper and she looked away for a moment. “H-he didn’t even tell you?”

“No, he denied it, even after...” Tony didn’t want to say about the bruises he had seen that day. “I was at your apartment that day because he was meant to tell you. I didn’t realise that he would leave.”

“But he’s been with you for 5 weeks. You could have told me any time. How could you not?” Tony could feel May’s rage start to build again and this time he didn’t want to dodge it.

“I’m sorry. I should’ve told you.” Tony’s voice wavered. “He said he’d never forgive me if I did, that he would leave. I was...I was scared.”

May looked up at that. “He said something before, that he left and you brought him back?”

Tony steeled himself for a bigger onslaught. Her nephew had been halfway across the country and he still didn’t tell her. God, if something had happened to him while he was out there.

Tony shuddered. “Yeah, he wasn’t dealing with it well. Refused to talk about what happened. The fight at school. Then there was a minor accident with Morgan, and he panicked. Ran; but he went and hid at Clint’s. I brought him back and it got him to agree to therapy finally and I think it’s helping; like really helping, May.”

“He’s talking to someone?” May’s face looked so hopeful.

“Yeah, her name is Jan, highly recommended, won’t tell me a goddamn thing which is probably a good sign, means she takes confidentially seriously.” Tony sighed. “He was so adamant that he didn’t want to break up your family, no matter what we said. We just hoped, once his confidence came back, once he was feeling stronger...in control...we could get him to tell you himself, or let us.”

May didn’t say anything and Tony had no idea what she was thinking.

“I’m really sorry May. I thought it was best; that if he ran for good...” Tony’s throat felt tight. “After Titan, I held him as he...I- I couldn’t risk losing him again.”

He pushed his eyes to the floor: the weight of his selfishness hitting hard.

He felt her hand on his shoulder and looked up into her tear-filled eyes. The anger was gone, replaced with a look of understanding. They both leant forward at the same time and enveloped each other in a hug.

Tony could feel May’s heart hammering against his and he felt the sob travel through her entire body as she let herself lean further into him.

“I trusted him. I trusted him with everything.” She almost whispered into his chest; no need to clarify who she meant. “How could I have been so wrong?”

No words would help right now so Tony simply tightened his hold on her.

Chapter End Notes

I literally completely changed this chapter and wrote it all today -eek! I normally marinade on things for a while but was eager to share with you all. Hope that was the right call!

Chapter 34

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Peter

The Medbay at the Compound was much nicer than the local hospital had been. Not that he'd been totally with it enough to take in the surroundings too much while he were there. Dr Cho and her Marvellous Medicine had seen to that and made him practically float through the journey here.

When he woke now, feeling brighter and lighter from the drugs this time, he could hear two achingly familiar heartbeats. May's heart rate was slow and steady – was she sleeping? – but Tony's was faster, and he could hear his chair make a soft noise every now and then, like he was on his phone or tablet or something.

They are both here.

His body rushed with endorphins of relief. They'd sorted something out, some truce. He wouldn't have to fight or choose. Thank God; he was tired of trying to swim up-stream.

Then he remembered what it meant that May was here. May; who didn't know anything about what had happened with Kevin until yesterday. May; who he'd left behind. He didn't open his eyes. He wasn't ready to deal with her and try to explain. He wasn't ready to know how angry she was going to be at him for letting Alfie get hurt.

"May," Peter almost flinched at Tony's unexpected voice. It wasn't loud at all, but it wasn't a whisper.

"Huh?" May's voice came through weakly. She had been asleep. "Shit, I dosed off."

"You should have gone to bed upstairs."

“Pot. Kettle.”

“I’m not growing another person.”

“Have you seen my ankles? You really don’t need to remind me.”

Peter made out a hum of a laugh from Tony. The kind of tone that made him feel warm inside. So; they were joking with each other; that was a good sign.

“Has he...?”

“No; still sleeping.”

“Good, good...” her voice trailed off and he was almost certain that she was staring at him right now. “It will help him heal.”

“Sorry to wake you but they’ll be here to take his statement soon. Longest I could put them off really. They weren’t happy we moved him here.” Peter could hear Tony tapping his finger on something, the armrest maybe.

“They can wait until he is ready.” Her voice sounded hard.

“You want to go get a shower, something to eat? Pepper’s upstairs with the kids.”

“Yeah, I guess I better,” May sighed. “They will already think I am a neglectful mother; wouldn’t want to look a mess too.”

“May...” Everything in Tony’s tone said, *‘don’t be ridiculous’*.

“- Don’t.” Her voice cut him off sharply. “I can’t hear all that *‘it’s not your fault stuff’*. Just, not now.”

Peter almost opened his eyes to speak to her. To tell her that he was at fault. Kevin was. Never her. But before he could, he heard her move.

“Right, a shower. You’ll...”

“I’ll stay here.”

He heard her pad away and a door open and close.

A few beats went past.

“You gonna stop pretending to be asleep yet, or do you want me to humour you some more?”

Peter cracked opened one eye to see Tony with a warm look on his face.

“Busted.” He tried what he hoped came across as a sheepish grin.

He started to sit up, but Tony jumped up. “No, no. Lie back. I’ll raise the bed for you.”

Tony pressed the button and brought him up to more of a sitting position. Peter winced as the change in position suddenly made him aware of his injuries: a dull pain from his back and ribs and a heaviness in his arm but better than last time he woke up.

“Too much?” Tony asked, alarm evident on his face.

“No, it’s fine now.” He rested his head back on the pillow behind.

“Water?” Tony already had the cup in hand. Peter nodded; suddenly noticing how his throat was dry. It looked like Tony intended to put the cup to his lips like he was an invalid. He almost stopped him with his good hand but then he relaxed; it was nice to be taken care of. Tony’s hand ghosted over his hair as he drank and then the man sat back down, angling the chair towards him

more.

“Thanks, Tony.” Peter let a smile slowly spread on his face. “So...what’d I miss?”

“I’m not *Hamilton* riffing with you now,” Tony said, his lips curling into a smile before he continued: “*Virginia my home sweet home, I wanna give you a kiss.*”

“I knew you were only pretending to hate it!”

Peter had been obsessed with the soundtrack and Tony had gotten him tickets for his 16th Birthday, complaining the whole time when Peter insisted that he had to come along too.

Tony shrugged but with a smile. The smile faltered for a second. “So, are we done with deflecting for today?”

“I thought you of all people would be down for at least another hour of deflecting.”

“Yes, well...” He waved his hand theatrically. “So, Mr Eavesdropper, you will have heard that there are people who want to talk to you today...”

Peter looked to the side, biting into his lip at the thought. “Right...and they would be...?”

“Police and CPS, kid.” Peter suppressed a shiver as Tony continued. “I might be able to put them off another 24 hours, but then we might lose some of the evidence due to your fantastical healing abilities.”

Peter’s mouth started to feel increasingly dry again. “What will they need?”

“Recorded statement from you about last night. Photos or video evidence of your injuries. They’ll get the hospital reports as well, of course. I spoke to them about what I saw at the apartment already.”

“Are you going to get in trouble?” Peter’s heart rate spiked – which was picked up by the heart

rate monitor to his left.

“Pete.” Tony gave him a sharp look. “When I came in, he was beating you with a metal baton. My defence is pretty strong.”

Peter grimaced at the memory.

“You blasted him, right? Did he get badly hurt?”

“FRIDAY sensibly didn’t have them at full pelt. He just has some bruises and a mild concussion. He got off far too easily.”

The statement hung in the air for a second. Peter ploughed on with questions before Tony could ask ones of his own.

“Did May see him?”

“I’ll let you talk to her about that,” Tony said, carefully. “Shall I call her back down? She’s desperate to properly speak to you.”

“Um, no, it’s ok.” Peter studied the small details of the blanket.

Tony’s calloused hand slipped onto his arm above the cast. “Hey...”

His soft voice was followed by a ducking of his head trying to catch Peter’s eyes, which gave Peter no choice but to look up at him.

Tony’s light brown eyes held his with concern and love. “You don’t want to see her?”

“I...” Peter didn’t know what to say. I mean it was May, of course he did. He was hurting and he wanted nothing more than to be wrapped up in her arms and be told everything was going to be okay. But what if that wasn’t what was going to happen now. “Does she know about...everything now?”

Tony's fingers rubbed against his arm. "She figured out that this was not the first time and that it was why you left home without my having to say anything."

"Be honest, is she mad? About Alfie?" Peter looked up at Tony. He would tell him the truth.

Tony's eyes widened. "Not at you. At him. At me for not telling her. But not at you, kid."

Peter felt some tension leave his body. "OK, maybe wait ten minutes for her to shower and then ask FRIDAY to tell her I'm awake?"

"You get that FRI?"

"Yes, Boss."

There was a knock on the door then and it opened to reveal Dr Cho.

"Peter, glad to see you are awake. How are you feeling? Any pain?"

"I'm fine."

Tony gave him a pointed look.

Peter ducked his head. "A little pain in my back. Maybe like a 5/10."

Dr Cho consulted the tablet in her hands. "You are due your next lot of painkillers."

Peter shook his head. He didn't want that underwater feeling again.

"Underoos..." Tony's voice held a warning.

“They make me spacey and the Police are coming, I need to be able to talk to them. Can’t I have them later?”

Dr Cho tilted her head with a frown. “Given your pain levels, and your internal healing, I think it would be safe to drop the dosage. It should dull the pain but keep your lucidity.”

Tony gritted his teeth but didn’t say anything about the compromise.

“Can I look you over now?”

Peter nodded.

“Tony...” Dr Cho nodded towards the door.

“I said I wouldn’t leave....”

Peter could hear the worry in his voice. “I don’t mind him staying.”

“Ok, but don’t interfere.” Dr Cho raised an eyebrow at Tony.

Peter let out a laugh followed by a wince from the strain of it. “Sounds like you’ve been in Dr Cho’s way more than once...”.

Tony huffed, but with a smile, and dodged out of her way as she waved her hands so she could get closer to Peter.

“Always flapping around, but even worse when he is the patient. You can imagine how hard it was for him to keep still during all the sessions in the Cradle.”

Tony looked mock offended. “Hey Doc, isn’t that violating patient confidentiality or something?”

She shot him a wicked smile.

Peter noticed the colour of his cast then and waved it in Tony's direction. "Bone to pick with you, no pun intended, you couldn't have at least chosen Spidey red?"

"Please, you love it really. Just be lucky that I don't put gold trim around the edges next time you are asleep."

Peter stuck his tongue out. "At least it won't be on long – off in a few days, Doc?"

"Well, it might a bit longer than that."

Peter frowned. He usually healed breaks like this in a couple of days: at least enough to remove the cast.

Dr Cho continued. "You actually punctured your lung in two places – some glass from your back and one of your ribs. You lost a lot of blood. As we've seen before, your body heals the most dangerous issues first, so it's been busy internally." Dr Cho waved her hands in the direction of his arm. "The bones will be next and lastly the bruises. Your healing factor really is amazing; it would've been a different situation entirely otherwise."

"Can I, like, eat now?" Peter asked, keen to not think about what might have happened without his special healing.

Tony let out a laugh. "Priorities hey, Parker?"

Dr Cho smiled warmly at him. "It's a good sign that you're hungry. Just take it slow. Some soup to start would probably be a good idea."

"FRI, can you ask Pep to organise some soup for the Spiderling?" Tony called out and the lights in the room flashed once for yes.

Dr Cho spent a few more minutes looking over his body: re-dressing his wounds and looking at his ribs. Peter was glad of Tony's hand in his for the duration.

Dr Cho had just left when Pepper appeared at the door, a tray of soup and bread in her hands.

"Peter," her voice cracked as she saw him, and she practically shoved the tray at Tony to come up to him and give him a gentle hug on the bed.

"Sweetie, how are you feeling?" Her hand staying against his unbruised cheek; stroking gently.

"I'm doing ok. Hungry."

She swivelled around and glared. "Give it here, Tony."

Peter caught Tony's slightly put out look, as Pepper took the tray from him and placed it on his lap. Peter took this fussing from Pepper for what it was: worry for him and wanting to do something, however small, to help. He wasn't sure what he'd done to deserve such love. Tony caught Peter's eye and gave an exaggerated eye roll.

"I saw that, Mr Stark," came Pepper's voice without turning as she stirred the soup.

"How?" mouthed Tony to Peter with a shake of his head. Peter bit his lip to avoid laughing.

"There you go."

"Thank you for this, Pepper." Peter picked up his left hand with the spoon – that would take a bit getting used to. The soup was yummy. "Wow, this is amazing."

"Bucky made it. He's a surprisingly good chef."

Peter smiled. "Tell him thanks. Or I will later."

Pepper stroked his cheek once more before sitting in the chair next to him.

Tony got up from his seat and stretched his back out, a pop audible. “Should I take over with Morgan?”

“Oh, she has Uncle Rhodey and Clint entertaining her, she doesn’t want you.” Pepper said, a small smile playing on her lips.

“Clint is here?” Peter looked confused.

“He flew in this morning; wanted to see you,” Tony answered.

Peter felt very undeserving of all this attention for something so...minor. It wasn’t like he was injured in a battle saving innocent lives. This was a personal issue.

“Oh, he, um, didn’t need to do that...”

Tony cocked his head. “Get used to it kid, that’s what the Avenger family does.”

Before he could feel embarrassment heat his cheeks, the door opened again and a very tired May arrived, her hair only partially dried and wearing some clothes that looked to be Pepper’s.

“Sweetie,” her dark eyes melted into tears upon seeing him. The hollow, shell shocked look in her eyes from yesterday was gone and she looked more like the usual May, albeit an exhausted version.

“Aunt May,” Peter couldn’t control the waver in his voice. She went to him, wrapping her arms around him and perching on the edge of the bed. He pressed his eyes shut as he listened to the beat of her heart against his chest. They stayed like that for so long that when she pulled back, he realised that Tony and Pepper had left.

Peter watched her face searching every inch of his as she gently stroked his face. He didn’t have a mirror, but he could feel how sore his eye and cheek bone were, so he could imagine the sight she was seeing.

She stroked just underneath the bruise on his jaw before looking directly into his eyes.

“I’m sorry, May,” he rushed out before she could speak. “Sorry I shouted at you yesterday...sorry that Alfie got hurt because I didn’t...”

“Oh baby, no. Please don’t apologise. This...Alfie...is so not your fault. I-I just can’t believe this happened, was happening and I didn’t....”

Her voice cut off; emotion choking her.

Peter felt his chest tighten. “You didn’t do this, May.”

She regarded him then; a beat of silence between them before she slid her hand into his.

“What did he do to you sweetheart?”

Peter stiffened. “May...I don’t want to...you don’t need to hear...”

May looked at him sharply, obviously wanting more details.

“He just hit me a few times...”

She looked at him again, more pointedly, if that were possible but he wouldn’t back down on this. Hearing exactly what Kevin had done, what he had said, would only hurt her more.

Peter looked down to the floor, away from her piercing gaze. “I- I don’t want to talk about it,” he whispered.

May let out a shaky breath as she clutched at the neck of the sweater she was wearing; her knuckles white against the fabric. “How did I not see this?”

Peter hated seeing her blame herself when he had gone above and beyond to keep it from her.

“There really wasn’t anything to see – he kept mostly where no one would see. I hid it: pretended it was Spider-man stuff.”

“Why?” Her voice was soft with the most obvious question. “Why did you hide it, sweetie?”

“I just wanted you to be happy,” he whispered; even though the reasons were so much more than that. “And you and Alfie, you were happy with him.”

I didn’t want you to know about Ben.

It suddenly occurred to him that maybe Kevin would tell her now, like he always threatened her. Maybe he already had. His heart thumped at the thought.

Peter watched as May lifted her chin to the sky like she did when she was trying not to cry.

“I could never be happy if you were hurting, baby.” May lost her battle and a tear streamed down her cheek. “I knew that you didn’t like him, but I just hoped it would get better in time. God, I thought it was just trouble fitting in after the Snap. I was just so caught up with working all the time, the pregnancy and feeling ill. I-I should’ve paid better attention.”

Peter started to protest again but was silenced by her hand.

“Please baby, I can’t stand to hear you taking the blame for any of this. This is not on you.”

“Well, it’s not on you either,” Peter said firmly.

There was a pause; like the room had taken up its fill of emotion for the moment. It felt like it needed airing out: bad odours dispelled into the cool, morning air.

May seemed to sense that, as she changed tact, wiping her eyes and giving his hand a squeeze. “Eat that soup while it’s warm, hey? We can talk more later.”

Peter gave her a small smile and proceeded to eat the soup under her watchful gaze as she bustled around the room, straightening his sheets and moving a few things that looked out of place to her Nurse’s eye.

There was a knock again.

Tony popped his head through. “CPS and the Police are here. You up for it? I can probably take them on a tour of the Compound if you want some more time.”

Peter sighed. “No, let’s just get it over with.”

Tony nodded briskly before disappearing out of the door.

“May,” Peter felt his heart in his throat, but he had to ask. “I don’t have to tell them about the other times, you know?”

Peter was met with her confused expression.

“I don’t have to tell them. I can play down yesterday – say I hit him first - if you want to try to keep him out of jail. I wouldn’t be upset with you if you did, what with the Splodge coming soon...it’s okay if you want to keep your family together...I can just stay at Tony’s...”

May stalled, looking at the floor, and Peter’s stomach flipped. She would choose Kevin; their family. Of course, she would, why wouldn’t she?

When her eyes came up to meet his, he was terrified of the anger held inside them.

“Peter Benjamin Parker. You had better tell them every single detail. I don’t want any chance for that man to come near any of my children ever again – that damn well includes you. Do you understand me?”

“Yes Ma’am,” Peter stuttered out before she enveloped him a hug.

May and Tony had not been happy when he’d asked for them not to be present during the interview. Peter decided that he would tell the cops everything, but he didn’t want to do it whilst being aware of their reactions. He knew how much it would affect May; she would cry, and all this stress can’t be good for the baby. As for Tony, he knew that it would make him angry and he didn’t want Dr Cho to be having to deal with any heart palpitations today.

The interview had been long. Dr Cho and one of her nurses had come in to help them take the photos they needed for evidence.

Peter asked them to call Tony in at the end. The speed with which he arrived made Peter realise that he must have been waiting outside.

Tony came in with a quizzical look on his face. “How can I help?”

“You can access my phone remotely, right?” Peter asked. “I’ve no idea where it is.”

“Sure,” Tony pulled up his phone there and then and started typing.

“Can you send on some files to these guys?” Peter gestured to the three officials whose names he had already forgotten. He was so tired now and his side ached.

“Yep. What do you need?”

“In my camera there will be some photos of Alfie taken when I got to the apartment. Then there are also some video files in a folder called ‘*Prueba*’.”

Tony looked like he was thinking for a beat before he suddenly looked up to Peter- evidently having gone through his Spanish vocabulary. “Proof?”

Peter nodded once and sat back in the bed: exhaustion now taking over him. He barely remembered saying goodbye to the officials before he felt his eyes closing.

—

Tony

Officials dispatched; Tony made his way back to the Medbay. As he turned into the Medbay corridor, he could see his wife encompassing May in a side hug outside Peter’s room. As he got close, Pepper looked up and gave him a tired smile, not letting go of May. Huge sobs were wracking May’s body and he reached out and anchored a hand to her shoulder.

After a moment, her body stopped shaking and she pulled her head up, wiping her eyes with her sleeve.

“Sorry,” she mumbled. Pepper hushed her.

“He’s asleep now. Please go and get some rest.” Pepper’s voice ached with concern. “There’s a room all ready and made up for you and Alfie. Clint and Rhodey will look after him and bring him to you if he needs you.”

“I...” she hesitated, looking to the door to Peter’s room.

“Tony is going to do the same as you. I’ll sit with him while he sleeps.”

Tony raised an eyebrow to his wife but was shut down in a second by one of her sharp gazes.

“Come on May, I’ll show you to your room.” Tony was surprised when she let him lead her to the

elevator, leaning heavily on him.

They were up and out to the communal floor quickly: the sound of the two pre-schoolers laughing along with Clint's deep voice; clearly some sort of board game being played in the living room. Tony led her into one of the spare guest rooms. He flicked the side lamp on; a warm glow instantly making it feel less cold, despite the gloomy cloud filled sky outside.

"Try to get some sleep."

"Are you going to?"

"I better, or Pepper will murder me."

She lay down on the bed staring forward, as if everything caught up to her in that moment. He knelt down next to her.

"Do you need anything – water, some food?"

She didn't answer, but her red rimmed eyes found his. "He didn't want me – us – in there. Why?"

Tony had had the same thought himself but came to a quick conclusion. He sighed. "It's Peter; he's protecting us. *Again.*"

She reached out and grabbed his hand tightly. "But what if, what if there is something else, something he's not telling us?"

Tony frowned but she continued before he could speak.

"What if Kevin...what if he hurt him more than just physically, what if he touched him..."

Tony's stomach flipped. "Peter never said anything like that."

But then he never spoke about much of it at all, did he? Tony only knew what he'd seen those two times and, with the benefit of hindsight, at Clint's farm.

"Yes, but he hid all this and if I didn't notice the hitting, I could've missed that too...I..."

A fresh round of tears spilled from her eyes; and she looked so tired.

Tony pushed back his own emotion and stroked her arm. "Try not to get worked up right now. Hopefully he will come to us and tell us everything, but we will drive ourselves crazy imagining what might have happened."

She let out a shuddering nod now and let her eyes flutter shut.

Tony retreated and closed the door softly behind him.

May's words echoed in his ears. It wouldn't be past Peter to hide something important; the last few weeks had taught him that lesson. But if Tony didn't know the entirety of the situation, how could he fully help?

He made a beeline for the lab instead of his bedroom – he would put up with Pepper's disappointment later.

He tapped at the first Hologram as he entered the lab.

"FRI, bring up the files from Peter's phone that I sent on to the NYPD today. Save copies to my personal server."

The photos of Alfie popped up first. Although Tony had seen him in the flesh, it was jolting to see the marks again. He swiped them away with a flick of his finger.

"Find file marked '*Prueba*' and show me."

FRIDAY responded quickly and Tony could see a series of video files.

“Play through from date order, starting with earliest.”

The screen fills with Peter’s body backing away from the screen. He looks nervous and clears his throat a few times.

” Um, Hola buenos dias Senor Kent. Mi nombre es Peter Parker. He vivido en Queens, Nueva York durante toda mi vida.”

Tony was about to tell FRI to go to the next file, thinking this one got misfiled, when the image changed. He watches as Peter tenses, his eyes darting to the door and then Kevin comes into view, yanking him out of the chair and throwing him on to the bed – *I told you no* - and Tony clenched the chair underneath him as he watches Kevin start laying punches into him.

Peter isn’t moving or trying to get away, he is just taking it: and somewhere in Tony’s brain he registers that this can’t be the first time that Peter had taken a hit from Kevin. Tony feels a slosh of acid at the back of his throat as he watches Kevin grab Peter’s hair, wincing at the same moment Peter does. Kevin’s voice is changed by his breathing heavy now, but Tony can hear his words clearly.

“I’m in charge, you understand?” There is a bare recognition of that from Peter before he says *“Pussy. You should’ve stayed dead.”*

Kevin is gone from the frame, but Tony barely recognises it as all he can focus on is Peter’s ashen face; cringing as he sits himself up. Tony can see Peter’s hands shaking as he puts his head into them. He is mumbling something to himself, but Tony can only make out the words *May* and *Alfie* repeated. Peter straightens up then and lets out a breath; his eyes suddenly locking with the camera. He gets up gingerly, his arm reaching out for the camera and it moves around as he obviously picks it up. He holds it in front of his face; Tony can see some unshed tears there.

“That wasn’t meant to....” His head suddenly snaps towards the door; eyes widening. And Tony can see the absolute fear in them and in the tightening of his jaw. It is one thing to know this has happened to him and to imagine how he must have felt – to remember himself what that feeling was – but to see it happening is like a thousand shards of glass against his skin.

Peter’s face turns back again and this time his voice is lower. *“...he wouldn’t let me eat, so I snuck some fruit, but I guess he found out. It is, um, Wednesday March 22nd.”*

There is a movement and then the screen goes off.

Before Tony gets over the shock, the next video comes on: Peter's face in the camera but calmer than previously. He clears his throat before speaking.

"I guess I'm going to record these...events...from now on to, um, like show what's been going on. So, it's March 26th, um, Kevin pushed me up against the wall by my throat for getting in his way."

Peter holds the camera back and Tony can see the handprint around his throat.

Camera cuts off again and another one starts:

"March 28th. Pushed me into the kitchen cabinet for not cleaning up quickly enough." Peter puts the camera down and steps back into the middle of the room, pulling his top up and revealing a nasty bruise along his hip bone.

The next one comes on.

"March 30th. Wasn't happy that I went to my internship, even though I got home on time. Kicked me a lot."

Peter backs away again this time and slowly peels his top off, letting out a huff of pain. His right side is purple, and Tony just knows there is a broken rib in there.

That seems to earn him a slightly longer break as the next one is a week later.

"April 6th. Wasn't happy with how much I ate again. Grabbed my arm and punched me in the kidney."

Peter steps back and pulls his top off showing a bruised back and side and then stepping closer to show those familiar round shaped bruises along his arm.

The next video is different: it is close up, showcasing a bruise on his cheekbone this time.

“April 8th. He punched me in the face; said I’d talked back to him.” His eyes flicked back to the screen. *“I honestly didn’t.”*

Tony’s could see the bags under his eyes and the sheer weariness in his expression before the video cut off and moved to the next one.

“April 12th. Kicked ribs again, think one is broken. Didn’t clean up properly.” Blackened side shown again.

“April 16th. I didn’t call him sir.” Bruised arm and throat again.

“April 19th. He shoved me into a wall.” Peter is topless already and turns in a circle to show a large bruise on his shoulder blade. *“I-I don’t know what I did.”*

The look of confusion and the hopelessness in Peter’s voice causes Tony to catch a sob in his throat.

“April 20th, I got a paying job like he wanted, but he still wasn’t happy.” The camera flashed down to a nasty bruise snaking up from his hip to his belly button.

The next video shows Peter looking even worse. Tony realises that with each video he has looked thinner, paler, darker bags under his eyes. *How did I not see this?*

“April 23rd. Kevin caught me coming in after curfew, but he was already pissed that I went away this weekend.” Peter peeled off his top and Tony could see a faint red line on his arm – Tony realised that was the weekend they were at Clint’s. It must have been right after he got back. Peter turned around then displaying tell-tale lines from a belt: red lines and bruising. *“It’s the first time he’s used a belt.”*

“May 2nd. Guess I got some time to recuperate after the belt but now I’m back.” Tony hated the forced grin that Peter gave to the camera. *“And back with a vengeance. Stamped on my ribs again.”* He shows the camera the darkened skin on his left side; more than one break looking

likely.

“May 7th. I can’t talk loudly due to...” Peter rasps. *“...well, I’ll show you”*. Peter lifts his chin to fully show the buckle mark that covers his throat, then turns to show a horrendous amount of belt marks and welts on his back. He turns and shows his side – purple and swollen. This was what Tony had seen himself only a few hours later. *“This was the most mad he’s ever been. He found out that I’d been messing around when I went away. Said I’d embarrassed him because it isn’t Mr Stark’s job to keep me in line, it’s his.”*

Tony’s stomach dropped further. That time was *his* fault. If he hadn’t ran his mouth off at the Gala; if he hadn’t found it oh so funny to make Peter squirm at the arrow incident, then Kevin would have been none the wiser and Peter wouldn’t have been hurt.

He barely made it to the trash can before he emptied his stomach into it.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the slightly longer than normal delay - couldn't get this where I wanted it tbh!

Chapter 35

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Peter

Peter opened the door to his room feeling groggy. He'd slept on and off pretty much all day: though at least the second half had been in his room upstairs and not in the Medbay, where the bright lights and beeping assaulted his heightened senses.

Dr Cho had agreed to his move upstairs reluctantly, but he'd assured her his pain wasn't bad. For once he didn't feel like he was trying to be brave when he said it. Pepper had settled him in before May had arrived to take her turn coddling him. He'd asked for a movie – anything to avoid more conversations — which ended up with a Disney marathon with Alfie and Morgan. Evidently he'd fallen asleep again, and when he woke up, they were gone and it was dark outside.

He might have stayed in bed if it wasn't for the gnawing feeling in his stomach. He followed the smell of something divine all the way to the communal living area. There was a big kitchen island and around it sat Rhodey, Clint, Sam and Tony: a bottle of Scotch and five filled glasses in front of them.

Clint noticed him before he could speak, sitting up straighter in his chair.

“Hey Itsy,” Clint's voice warm but there was tension around his eyes.

He glanced around to see all four men smiling hesitantly at him; a few of their eyes darting around his face; no doubt resting on the dark bruises that his healing factor hadn't started on yet. Peter's eyes lingered on Tony who gave him a brief, small smile, but Peter could see it didn't go all the way to his eyes.

“You shouldn't be up,” Tony said almost absently, before looking back down at the scotch in his hand.

“Got a bit hungry.”

Peter started to go toward the fridge when Rhodey leapt up, surprisingly spritely despite his leg braces.

“Sit down, short stack. How’s lasagne sound? You’re in luck, Bucky made a ton.”

“That sounds great Colonel Rhodes, thanks.”

By the time Peter had struggled into the chair, impeded by his hurt ribs, Clint was at his side, putting a glass of water in front of him and giving his shoulder a long squeeze before he sat back down.

Peter pointed at the glasses of scotch on the table. “So, I don’t get one of those?”

“No,” they all said at once before gently laughing.

Peter smiled back; preferring the lighter tone in the room.

“So, how are you feeling?” Sam asked, leaning forward with his arms on the counter.

“Better. Dr Cho reckons I’ll be healed in no time. Good as new.” Peter heard how forced and chipper his own voice sounded, so didn’t mind when none of the men looked convinced.

The microwave pinged and a large portion of steaming lasagne was popped in front of him.

“Thanks,” Peter took a bite and swallowed it down even though it was a bit hot: the warmth feeling good in his empty stomach. “Oh God, this is frickin’ amazing.”

“Bucky doesn’t cook often, but when he does, it’s always good. I need a new strategy to get him to cook more,” Sam smiled.

“If you make more of those cookies Mr Wilson, I’ll move in here and cook for you.”

Sam raised an eyebrow with a smile. “Oh yeah, what is your speciality?”

Peter swallowed another bite before wrinkling his nose in thought. “Um, cereal...?”

They all gently laughed again.

“All the Barton clan send their get well soon wishes. Cooper and Lila said ‘don’t forget to message them back’ or was it ‘Snap’ or whatever -some other Gen Z bull.”

Peter grinned at him. “I kinda lost my phone yesterday, but tell them I will as soon as I can.”

Rhodey sat back down at the table. “I’m sure Tony can sort you out a new phone. Right, Tones?”

Peter was aware that Tony had been silent since he got there, his eyes barely leaving the table, which was not like him at all. He saw him jolt like Rhodey had kicked him under the table. He glanced away from his glass and up and over at Peter, again not holding his eyes for more than a millisecond. “Um, yeah, sure, no problem.”

Peter felt heat rise up his neck. Was Tony upset with him? He hadn’t seen him all afternoon. Maybe he was just tired; knowing Tony, he probably hadn’t slept much. Peter pulled his eyes away from him; Tony had once again been brought into his problems.

Peter looked up then, seeing Bucky walking into the room.

“Hey Mr Barnes.” He threw his hands up in a wave, forgetting about his broken ribs, and wincing as a flash of sharp pain went through them. He wrapped an arm around his middle and cleared his throat. “Um, this lasagne is amazing!”

Bucky’s eyes widened on seeing him. Oh yeah, Bucky was probably not going to be pleased that the hand to hand training he’d been giving him the last few weeks had not seemed to be well implemented. Bucky’s face set into a scowl as he walked right over to Tony, his metal fist thumping loudly on the counter next to him, causing Tony, and everyone else, to jump.

“You better tell me his full name **now**,” Bucky growled, fixing the scowl on Tony now.

Tony made eye contact with him, his eyes then flicking over to Peter before back to Bucky again.

“Calm down, Robocop,” Tony said with his usual snark, undeterred by Bucky’s demeanour.

“This is not a joking matter, Stark.” Bucky’s arm now flew out in Peter’s direction. “You gonna let this guy get away with hurting one of our own - *again*?”

Peter saw every muscle in Tony’s face contort. “I already blasted him into a wall. He’s in Police custody.”

This did not placate Bucky: his expression still so dark. “Did he break anything?”

Tony shook his head. “Concussion.”

“He deserves to at least have something broken in return.”

Peter waited for Tony to tell him no, but instead he looked at Bucky, seeming to consider this as a legitimate idea. “I could probably bribe someone to get ten minutes with him.”

“I’ll only need five.”

Peter looked around at the other grown-ups; waiting for them to jump in. Clint was watching Tony and Bucky, his jaw clenched but unconcerned. Rhodey, normally the person that levelled Tony out — the voice of reason — was similarly tight lipped, with a look on his face that showed he would actually condone this violence. He looked to Sam, who was looking right back at him.

“Guys, this is...this is crazy. I — Sam, say something...”

Sam sat back. “You think it’s strange that we care enough to want to get revenge for you?”

Trust Sam to make it into a feelings thing. Bucky was still standing next to Tony who was tapping something into his phone, which he then proceeded to show Bucky.

Shit.

“Guys, seriously, you don’t need to get revenge or whatever; it’s ok. I’ll be ok.”

They were barely paying attention to him so he raised his voice. “Stop OK? This time, it was different, I meant for it to happen.”

All of a sudden, five pairs of eyes were trained on him.

“Come again?” Bucky’s voice was gravelly.

“He hit Alfie, but it was just a slap. I knew they wouldn’t put him away for that. So I -I talked back to him, made sure to get him angry so he’d lash out. Didn’t hit him back on purpose. I had to be sure he would go away; that he wouldn’t get to Alfie or May or the baby ever again.”

“Fucking hell kid,” murmured Clint, looking up to the sky.

The rest of the room looked equally perturbed; staring at him with a mixture of shock and sadness.

Peter’s eyes came back to Tony whose jaw was clicking into overdrive before his eyes locked on Peter’s; his look as dark as he had ever seen it.

“But the video clips you gave to the Police - you already had enough proof.”

“What are you talking about?” Clint asked.

Peter looked at the table, suddenly feeling embarrassed, but if Tony noticed his discomfort, he didn’t seem to care.

“Turns out the genius here started cataloguing his injuries on video.”

All eyes were on him again and he felt the need to explain. He cleared his throat.

“I got a video of him one night by total accident and it gave me the idea. Cos my injuries heal so quickly, I thought if I ever wanted to go to the Police then they might not believe me.”

“That is actually a pretty smart thing to do,” Rhodey muttered, almost begrudgingly, and there was a thump with what sounded like Tony kicking him under the table now.

“It was kind of an insurance policy for in case he ever looked like doing something to Alfie or May. I didn’t think he ever would, but I—I was wrong about that.” He swallowed down the tears that threatened to come if he focussed too much on the fact that Alfie got hurt because he never spoke up. “So, now seems like the time to ‘cash it in’, I guess.”

“But you didn’t think that the, what, *four* times he broke your ribs in two months warranted it?” The anger in Tony’s voice coupled with the death stare he was shooting, made his stomach tighten. When he fully registered the words, it tightened further.

Peter’s jaw clenched as he spoke, forcing himself to look at his mentor. “You—you watched them.” It was a statement not a question: he knew Tony.

Tony held his gaze and it was full of so many emotions that he couldn’t read. “Yes.”

Peter looked at the counter-top for a second, unsure of what he was feeling himself. He looked up now, forcing his eyes to Tony’s. “Don’t show May.”

“Don’t you get it. It’s not about other peop—” Tony cut himself off and Peter watched as he pushed off his stool, the legs scraping the floor, grabbing his glass as he did. “I can’t with you right now - just go to bed, Peter,” Tony muttered before stalking off in the direction of the lab.

Peter watched his retreating back. Should he go after him? But even if he did, Peter didn’t know what to say or even if he really knew why Tony was so upset. Tears pushed into his eyes and there was no way he could sit there and cry in front of four of Earth’s mightiest defenders.

“Thanks for dinner,” is all he could push out before heading out of the room, ignoring Clint’s calls.

Tony

Tony wasn’t sure what number scotch he was on, but he didn’t feel drunk. Maybe it was the sobering images in front of him; the clips rolling one after the other that kept him from feeling it’s pull. He let his head rest against the wall trying not to think about Peter’s earlier confession — that he’d tried to get Kevin to beat him up on purpose. He either had the self control of a saint or the self preservation instincts of a moth in front of a lightbulb. Didn’t he realise that he could have died? Why didn’t he use the videos before this to save *himself*? And back round to the question that continually plagued him; why hadn’t Peter just come to him?

“Boss, Colonel Rhodes and Mr Barton want to access the lab.”

“Ugh,” Tony didn’t have the patience for this.

“Boss, Colonel Rhodes is threatening to use his ‘Platypus knows best’ protocol to gain access if you don’t ‘open the goddamn door’.

“Fine, let them in.”

Tony closed his eyes as he heard their hurried footsteps migrate towards him.

“Damn it Tony, you can’t just storm off and leave the kid with his mouth flapping open and come and hole yourself up in here...” Rhodey started and Tony waited for him to continue with his well earned lecture - probably about how useless Tony was for Peter. One he wholeheartedly agreed with.

Rhodey and Clint stopped next to him and after a moment of unexpected silence, Tony looked up enough to see that they were both staring at the hologram, listening to Peter's words that were playing softly. Tony saw them both full-body tense as it started through from the beginning again and they saw Kevin himself pummelling the kid.

"What the actual fuck?" Clint breathed out. "He had this sitting there since March?"

"Wait till you see the one after I took him to yours for the weekend. Oh, Kevin didn't like that one bit." Tony pushed himself up the wall to standing, glass still in hand. "Oh, and the one after I ran my mouth at the Gala and Kevin really hated me being involved and doubled down on retribution. That's the winner, right there."

Tony had almost chugged down the rest of the scotch before Rhodey pulled the glass out of his hand.

"How many times have you watched these, Tone?"

"Leave me alone, Rhodes." He tried to move away from him, but Rhodey was in his face with that concerned undertone that Tony knew he just didn't deserve right now.

"Tony..."

"Not enough!" The shout fills the room. "Not enough!"

Both of the men stilled.

"I should've been there. I should've known. I should've stopped it." Tony leant forward on his knees, breaths not coming in fast enough. "Bucky's right. I should have ended that guy while I had the chance. He's my fucking kid, alright?! It's on me to protect him: it's on me."

Tears spilled out and Rhodey pulled him tight into his arms. Tony let himself crumple: his tears freely saturating his best friend's shoulder. Clint's hand formed a warm hold around the back of his neck. Tony tightened his grip on Rhodey and just let it all out.

Peter

Peter's back was to the door when he heard it open, but he didn't need to turn around to see who it was. If his heartbeat didn't give it away, then his scent did: the usual motor oil and cologne today mixed with the strong smell of alcohol.

After a moment, Peter felt the weight of the bed change as Tony sat on it. His hand slipped gently onto Peter's shoulder: the warmth buffering through the fear he felt. The time he'd spent lying here had given him space to think; to try to see why Tony had been upset with him. He was angry that Peter had provoked Kevin and got himself hurt and he was angry that Peter had not come forward with the evidence sooner. All of that said that Tony cared, right? Peter just wanted everything to be back on an even keel.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, trying to keep his voice from breaking but failing.

Tony shifted down the bed and gently turned him around to face him: both of them lying down. Peter scooted closer straight away, fisting some of Tony's shirt and putting his head against his chest.

"Don't be sorry. I was a jerk." Tony murmured, rubbing circles on his shoulders. Peter could feel his warm breath in his hair.

"I should've told you about the videos." Peter paused. "I should've told you about all of it."

Tony pulled him closer.

"I wish you had." Tony's hand found the back of his neck now, the warmth reassuring. "Seeing you going through all of that - alone. Well, at all, but you know..."

Peter nodded into his chest.

“What am I going to do with you, kid?” Tony whispered, not in an unkind way, his fingers twisting into the waves of Peter’s hair at the nape of his neck. Peter hummed in return.

“MJ always says I’m a walking disaster.”

“And she is one of your best friends?!”

“She’s one of my *only* friends. But she’s not wrong though.”

Tony snorted at that before letting a silence unfold.

“They all think I’m crazy, don’t they? Getting beat up on purpose.” Peter ventured: his mind flashing back to the kitchen and the men’s faces when he’d told them.

“There is a pretty high bar for crazy in this team, kid.”

Peter huffed into his chest.

“Look, none of us would be in the whole superhero gig if we weren’t self sacrificing in some way. You have to be to put yourself in front of bullets and blood-lusting aliens.” Tony hesitated for a second: a pause in the circles he was rubbing on Peter’s back.

“I knew that putting on the stones...clicking my fingers...meant death – at least it should have – but I did it to protect the people I loved. So, what you did, what you’ve been doing to protect someone, I get it. *They* all get it.” Tony let out a sigh. “So no, they don’t think you are crazy. Maybe just a little misguided in the way you went about it.”

Peter didn’t know what to say to that. Thinking of himself sharing commonalities with the other Avengers wasn’t something he did – he was just...Peter.

“That’s different. That was world saving stuff; this is...”

Tony cut him off.

“This is *your* world buddy; don’t downplay it’s importance. And you can’t take the weight of the world on your shoulders anymore, Pete. You’ve got to learn to share the load.” Tony’s voice was gentle. “I didn’t save the world; when we took on Thanos, we took him on as a team. You *have* a team - so many people who care about you. Look at tonight — the Winter Soldier wanted a reboot to avenge you and no one else was going to stop him. You’ve got the Avengers team, your friends, May and me and Pep. We’re all on your side, if you’ll let us be.”

Peter nodded into his chest again before Tony continued.

“And look, even when you make mistakes or bad choices - there isn’t anything you can do that’s going to get rid of us all. We’ll still love you, no matter what.”

Peter let that sink in for a moment. When he’d started off as Spider-man, it had just been him. Just his weird abilities and a burning desire to stop people feeling helpless like he had when Ben had died. But now, he had more than that. He was Spider-man but he was also an Avenger. He was Peter Parker the orphan, but he also had this extended family to lean on.

Peter felt Tony press a kiss to the top of his head and even though thoughts still whizzed around his head, he enjoyed the feeling of being wrapped safely in his arms.

“I really don’t want May to see the videos.” Peter blurted out after a few minutes. “I didn’t want you to either, but, well, that ship has sailed.”

Tony sighed. “I wasn’t going to – not without your permission— but then May said something. When you didn’t want us in the police interview, she was worried that you were hiding something else from her. And after everything, I thought she had a point.”

Peter tensed. There was only one thing he didn’t want May to know.

“She was worried that maybe he had sexually abused you too.”

“What?!” Peter’s head flew up and just missed colliding with Tony’s chin.

“So, I watched the videos in case you said something there. Which you didn’t.”

Peter shook his head. “No, he never did anything remotely like that.”

Tony nodded; satisfied with his answer. “Ok buddy.”

Peter went to put his head back on Tony’s chest, but Tony’s finger stopped under his chin, keeping his eyes locked on his. “But there is a secret that you don’t want May to know, isn’t there? Happy heard Kevin say something when you got suspended. And you mentioned it when you got back from your road-trip. It’s about Ben.”

Peter tried to pull away, but Tony’s arms tightened around him.

“You feel responsible for his death.”

Peter’s breath caught and he succeeded in moving away from Tony now: creating a short distance.

“It’s not how I feel. It’s the facts.”

“Underoos...”

“Don’t...don’t say it wasn’t my fault. I was there, I let the guy get away and I -I just froze. I didn’t call the cops, I just hugged him. How fucking useless is that.”

“Pete, that was a horrendous situation. Anyone would have frozen - May won’t blame you for that.” Tony’s eyes were almost begging him to believe what he was saying.

“You don’t know that.” Peter curled his good arm around himself. “Kevin figured it out— dangled it over me. And he didn’t even know about my powers. If she finds out I had my powers then, how could she not -” Peter’s voice wavered. “A kid she is not even blood related to, let her first husband die and is sending her second one to jail. How could she not hate me?”

Tony shifted himself over to Peter so quickly that he didn't have time to get out of the embrace, even if he'd wanted to.

"She won't hate you because she will see what I do; that none of this was ever your fault. I promise, kiddo."

Tony's voice was so sincere and telling him everything that he wanted to hear but it was just all too much. Peter's tears clogged up his throat and he gasped for air in between sobs into Tony's chest.

"Please tell her, Pete. You can't have this hanging over you forever."

—

Peter woke up feeling something warm and firm under his head. His eyes flicked open.

Tony.

The man's face was inches from his; his hair dishevelled like he'd spent 24 hours in lab lockdown. The smell of scotch from under his breath was sour but Peter ignored it: focusing on the reassuring beat of his heart instead. Daylight was streaming in now and Peter inched himself up, trying not to wake Tony. Had they slept through all night? As he got up on his good elbow, he saw May sitting cross legged on the bean bag chair next to his bed: some steam rising from the cup in her hand.

"Morning sleepyhead," she whispered as he sat up fully.

That apparently was enough to wake Tony as he let out a low garbled sound and leant over rubbing the arm Peter had been lying on.

"You gave me a dead arm, kid." His eyes were still pressed together. "And this is my best one."

A snort of laughter came from May and Tony's eyes opened and he looked over to see her.

"Hey May, you could've warned me that the kid is like a dead weight when he sleeps," he grumbled to her, closing his eyes for a long second.

"Yep, one time Peter fell asleep along Ben's leg all night and when he tried to get up the next morning, he had too many pins and needles and face planted the floor. Had to go to A&E to reset his nose."

Tony snorted.

Peter shrugged. "He was comfy."

May's face suddenly serious turned serious; "Did you have a nightmare last night?"

"Oh, no, we were just...talking about stuff and after I must have dosed off."

Tony rubbed his eyes before sitting up with his back against the headboard. "Yeah, it was a heavy conversation." Peter felt the weight of Tony's hand on his lower back.

They'd talked for over an hour. Peter had told him everything. What had happened that night with Ben. Every fear, every thought he'd ever had about Ben. Tony had listened: he'd reassured, he'd let him cry.

"About Kevin?" May's voice wavered.

"Kind of...more...more about Ben," Peter said softly.

"Ben?" May tilted her head. "It's would make sense you'd miss him when times are tough..."

"T-that's not exactly why..." Peter stuttered. Tony rubbed circles on his shoulder.

“I’ll let you talk alone.” Tony started to move but Peter caught his hand.

“Stay? Please.”

If May went ballistic, at least Tony would be here to pick up his pieces.

Tony’s body relaxed back to where it had been, his thumb rubbing firmly between Peter’s shoulder blades, grounding him.

“May, there’s something I should have told you...before... but I didn’t because I was ashamed and I hate myself for it so I’d understand if you hated me, I wouldn’t judge you...”

“Peter.” May’s voice trembled and he saw her eyes flick to Tony for some kind of reassurance. He only had a glum look on his face.

Peter took a breath and pushed on.

“When Ben got shot, I already had my powers. I’d had them for like two weeks. The robber, he pushed past me, but I just let him go because I thought it wasn’t my problem, but Ben stopped him. Or tried to and...if I had done, I—well, he’d be here now. And then I just panicked, I didn’t even call an ambulance, and just held him while he...I just held him, I didn’t know what to do...”

Tears poured down his cheeks but he couldn’t look at her. He could sense that she was totally still and staring at him.

“K-Kevin said if I told about what he was doing...that he’d tell you how I froze, didn’t even call for help...and that you wouldn’t want me anymore. I didn’t want you to hate me. I didn’t want to lose you too. But I’ll understand, if you don’t want to see me anymore...”

He was cut off by her arms being flung around his neck. “Baby, oh my poor sweet baby.” He could feel her tears in his hair. “Oh, my darling.”

After a minute she pulled away, her face blotchy. “That was not your fault.” She lifted his chin as he tried to duck away. “It doesn’t matter if you had your powers, that guy shot him. Oh angel. I

could never hate you for that. I hate that you were there for that, that you experienced that, but one thing that always occurred to me was that Ben wasn't alone when he died, he was with the person he most loved in the world."

Deeper sobs came from within him than he ever thought possible. May was there; her heartbeat quick against his chest but her murmurs reassuring. She was hugging him closer, not pushing him away. Peter felt a second pair of strong arms encircle him; warm and grounding. The confession made him feel lighter; the weight of it shared. He let himself really cry then; for Ben, for the years of guilt, for the months he carried the burden of Kevin's anger. He realised then; he doesn't have to do it all alone: not when he has a family.

Chapter End Notes

Anyone like some crackers with their cheese?! Hope it was more Cheddar and less Camembert 😊

I've had inspiration to add a new chapter so I will be writing that so it will be a few days til the next one for anyone who likes to be prepared 😊

Thanks again for amazing support

Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

So this morning I woke up to over 50,000 hits on this fic.

That is insane! When I first started posting this, I would have been happy to have a handful of people see it, so to say that I have been flabbergasted by the level of support, would be the understatement of the year.

I've made a more gushing post about this on Tumblr but the gist of it is: Thank you, thank you, thank you.



See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Peter

The elevator was as smooth as ever as he let himself rest back against the walls. Sessions with Jan were always taxing but the last few weeks has been particularly tough. She wasn't pushy by any means, letting him take the lead, but since his altercation with Kevin, she often brought the conversation back around to touch on him putting himself in mortal danger unnecessarily. There wasn't much he could say to that, other than it obviously hadn't been his intention to get skewered by a random piece of glass. That had elicited a single eyebrow raise from the unflappable woman. Still, Jan was supportive as ever and it was nice to have somewhere he could talk without feeling like he had to weigh his words. May, Pepper and Tony were easy to talk to, but he knew hearing about it affected them.

As soon as he stepped out onto the floor, he could hear the pounding of two sets of feet.

"You told them I was back, FRI?" Peter had been hoping for half hour respite before being dragged away by the terrible twosome.

"Miss Morgan asked for me to alert her when you returned."

“Way to sell me out, FRI,” he muttered as they came into sight. Morgan’s hair flew out behind her as she ran, followed close behind by Alfie, his own tight blond curls bouncing.

They both ran into him at full pelt; “Oof!”

“Petey, we are just gonna watch a movie, wanna come?” Morgan asked.

“Miss Pepper said that we can have popcorn!!” Alfie looked like this was the best thing he’d heard in his entire life.

Since May and Alfie had moved into the Tower, the two of them had been inseparable; insisting on sleeping in the same room. In typical Tony fashion, he had immediately transformed one side of Morgan’s room into a dinosaur themed haven complete with 5 foot tall Diplodocus. May was weary enough that she had barely protested the extravagance.

“Sorry, I’ve got to study for my finals.”

They were coming up in a few days and Peter was struggling to fit it all in. He’d had to catch up on homework he missed while he was recuperating, and he felt like he was always playing catch up.

“Aww that’s no fun…” Morgan was close to a pout.

“I know, but you know what? My legs feel really light today, like I’m missing something.”

Both Morgan and Alfie shared a look and squealed and within half a minute he had them wrapped around a leg each: their bums resting on his sneakers. He held out a hand to each and they took it.

They giggled as he started to step across the hallway, exaggerating each step.

“Oh my,” he loudly play-acted. “My legs suddenly feel *so* heavy; but I have *no* idea why.”

This was the routine they liked – word for word, emphasis in the exact same spots. God forbid he

ever ad lib. He'd faced the wrath of Morgan when he'd tried that once. Never again.

The giggling carried on as he arrived at the living room: stomping in to see Pepper, a laptop in front of her, looking up as she heard their arrival. Her face filled with nothing less than an adoring smile.

"Hi Pepper, I'm having terrible trouble with my legs. Do you know where Morgan and Alfie are? They might be able to help."

There was a squeal of high-pitched giggles. "We are right here, silly!"

Peter looked down at the gleeful faces and did a faux double take which led to another outburst of giggles. He bent down and scooped them both up.

"It was you two!" He wriggled his fingertips into their sides and they giggled and squirmed. He gently threw them onto the massive fluffy beanbag that was next to the couch.

"More, more," Alfie chanted as they both struggled to get out of the beanbag.

"Uh uh, your brother has studying to do. Right?"

Pepper to the rescue.

"Sadly so," Peter said, giving them a pouty face to match the ones shooting at him.

"Later?" Morgan tried.

"Sorry, but Peter is going to be busy with Uncle Bucky later," Pepper interjected. Peter looked at her – it was the first he'd heard of it. "FRIDAY, please start the movie. Get comfy kiddos, I'll get the popcorn."

Pepper slid an arm around his waist and steered him out of the living room and towards the kitchen. "*Did you know that my Uncle Bucky has pet goats?*" being the last thing he heard as

they rounded the corner into the kitchen.

“I can get the popcorn, Pepper,” Peter offered as he pulled his backpack off his back and onto the kitchen island.

“It’s fine. You get on with your work.”

“Bucky is coming?”

“He wanted to spend a few days in the city – something about looking round the old streets he knew in Brooklyn - and Tony is going to do some maintenance on his arm.”

Peter spun to look at her: an excited grin spreading across his face. Before he could speak, she waved a manicured finger at him. “Before you ask, be sensitive that he may not want you in there too. I can imagine his arm might be associated with some painful memories.”

That closed Peter’s mouth in a second: that made sense. He turned back to his work and chewed on his lip. It would be totally awesome to see how it worked though.

Pepper placed a bowl of popcorn next to him and a kiss on his temple before disappearing off to feed the kids.

Peter reached into the bowl and accidentally knocked a few kernels to the floor. Ok, more than a few. He jumped down and scooped them up, stepping towards the bin and waving his hand to let the motion detector know to open up. Typical for Tony to have such an extra bin as well. He dropped the kernels in, but couldn’t help but notice that there was a bouquet of flowers in there.

Peter frowned. He was no expert, but they looked pretty fresh. There was a card on top and Peter’s nosiness forced him to pluck it out.

It was a neat white rectangle, bordered with red. The card was handwritten with the words:

May, my love. I miss you and our little family so much. Please let me explain. K

As much as he tried to keep his mind on his work, his hand kept slipping to the card that was burning a hole in his pocket.

Was this the first time Kevin had contacted her? It didn't sound like it. Would she talk to him? Did she want to be back with him?

Peter knew that Kevin was out on bail – they had sat him down and told him that straight away. It didn't seem right to Peter, but apparently his previous good record stood him in good stead to get bail. He had also apparently plead not guilty at the first hearing. *'I saw him with my own eyes,'* Tony had said incredulously to that.

Peter chewed the end of his pen once again, ignoring the plastic taste in his mouth.

“FRIDAY?”

The AI's voice rang out clearly. “Yes, Peter?”

“Can you access May's phone records?”

“Yes, however I do believe that would be a violation of her privacy.”

Peter sighed.

“It's for her safety.”

“OK, Peter. I can give you some limited information. Anything else would require Mr Stark's override. What would you like to know?”

“Has she had any calls from Kevin Hayes in the last two weeks?”

“Mrs Hayes had four phone calls from Kevin Hayes exactly two weeks ago.”

Huh, four on the day he got let out. That wasn't exactly overkill. He tapped his pen against the countertop.

“Have there been any other unusual calls or messages from unknown numbers since then?”

There was a beat of silence.

“There have been 255 text messages and 107 calls from various unknown numbers.”

Peter dropped the pen. “What?!”

“The last call was this afternoon at 1.45pm. Mrs Hayes did not answer but a voicemail was left.”

“FRIDAY, you record all communications inside the Tower, right? Can you play me that voicemail?”

“I am not at liberty to share any private calls or correspondence, Peter.”

Peter swallowed down the acid that was rising in his throat. Why hadn't she told anyone that she was in contact with him? Was she considering taking him back?

Does May believe me?

He shook his own head as if to erase the stupid. Of course she does, nothing she had said or done refuted that. She'd uprooted her entire life for God's sake.

But May hadn't mentioned this.

Peter looked at his laptop. Hacking May's phone would be fairly easy. It was an older model with no encryptions. He nudged the screen out of sleep mode so it flickered to life. He stared at the Physics notes that had been left on screen for a full ten minutes; his fingers trailing over the card in his pocket, before he closed it with a snap.

"FRI, where is Tony?"

"Boss is currently in his lab with Sergeant Barnes."

Peter remembered Pepper's words. "Could you ask if I'm allowed to join them right now?"

There was a pause of a minute.

"Boss says '*swing on down, Spiderling*'".

Peter headed along the corridor to the far end of the floor. The doors to the lab swished open as soon as he got there, and he walked in.

Peter approached tentatively, which was a bit pointless since Bucky would've heard the doors, if not his approach from the corridor. Sure enough, Bucky's eyes were on him as soon as he rounded the corner.

Bucky was sat on the beaten-up couch with his arm propped along the back. It only took Peter half a second to realise why they were looking at his arm here, rather than in a proper lab or Medbay. It must have bad connotations.

Tony was hovering in front of Bucky, fiddling with a hologram of the metal arm: parts labeled and calculations showing.

"Hey," Peter said.

Tony jumped. "Geez kid, don't sneak up on people like that."

Bucky gave him a wry grin. “Yeah, old people can be hard of hearing.”

Tony’s eyes flicked to Bucky and then to Peter; realising they were sharing a joke at his expense.

“Again, I’m surrounded by assholes with super hearing,” he muttered under his breath.

“We can hear you,” Peter deadpanned.

“I know!” Tony looked exasperated for half a minute before slapping on a smirk.

Bucky let out a smile of his own. It was nice to see him more comfortable around him and Tony.

“So, come on Parker, I know you are itching to get a look at this.” Tony nodded towards the hologram of the arm.

Peter hesitated for just a millisecond. “Um, is that ok with you Mr Barnes? It’s cool if you’d prefer some privacy...”

A look of appreciation washed across his features. “No, it’s fine, kid. And just call me Bucky.”

“Sure thing, Mr Bucky.”

Tony let out a bark of a laugh as Bucky’s eyebrows raised. Peter gave Bucky a crooked smile.

“I told you he was a little shit,” Tony laughed again. “Come on Parker, we are just mapping it out and then we’ll do the maintenance tomorrow.”

Peter paid attention as Tony showed him the workings of the arm from the schematics. He was unsurprised that it was a work of genius since it came from Shuri.

“Right Buckaroo, that’ll do for now. We’ll get more hands-on tomorrow.”

Bucky didn’t look excited by the prospect but nodded; “Thanks.”

Tony sat down on the coffee table and cricked his neck as Bucky pulled on his hoodie.

Peter flexed up and down on the balls on his feet; his fingers once again gravitating to the card in his pocket. He’d come down with the intention of talking to Tony about it, but now he wondered if he had overreacted. He felt keyed up though; the thought of sitting back down and trying to study was pretty unappealing.

“Um, Bucky, do you have any plans now?”

Bucky shrugged. “Not really.”

“Do you fancy training for a little bit?”

Bucky shrugged again, this time in the affirmative.

“What happened to *‘I don’t have enough time to study for finals, Mr Stark. I’m going to fail and have to live in your basement until I’m 33.’*”

“You aren’t the only one allowed to have dramatic moments, you know?” Peter rolled his eyes. “I just need to move a bit. I feel like I never get to expend my energy anymore.”

Tony looked away. Peter usually used up all his energy Spider-manning and Tony knew that. Tony hadn’t brought up the fact that he still wasn’t going out as his alter ego. Not once; which meant he was purposefully avoiding the topic.

He didn’t need Tony reminding him anyway; Ned forwarded on every mention online of Spider-man’s ‘disappearance’ from Queens. He knew Ned wasn’t meaning to put pressure on him, but it wasn’t helping. He’d started to think about it again, which was more than he could have said a month ago. Sparring and training with Bucky the last few weeks had been a good outlet, a place where he didn’t have to worry about his strength or losing control.

“Come on then, kid,” Bucky said, standing up. “You can show me the gym set up here.”

An hour later and Peter was regretting his decision. Sweat was dripping from – well, everywhere – it felt like. Bucky looked like he had barely perspired. Peter tried to focus his concentration; he dodged a blow, but not quite quick enough and he got thrown to the floor. Again.

Bucky straddled him, forcing his metal arm against his neck. Peter tapped out once his breath started to constrict.

“You’re dead. Again.” Bucky rolled off of him and they both lay panting on the floor, staring up at the vaulted ceiling.

After a moment, Bucky sat up on one arm, staring at him.

“You’re distracted.”

“Sorry,” Peter mumbled towards the ceiling.

“You were the one who wanted to train. You’re gonna get hurt if you aren’t focusing.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I just...yeah, I’m distracted.” Peter looked at Bucky, who was still looking intently at him. He averted his eyes.

Bucky lay back down next to him and they sat there in silence for a few moments.

“What do you do when you find out that someone is hiding something important from you?” Peter burst out.

Bucky popped back up on his arm again and levelled Peter with a semi-amused glare.

“I know, I know; the irony is not lost on me.”

Bucky snorted.

“Like, do I confront them, or just see what happens? I was going to try to get some more information, but they might not like me snooping.” Peter ran his hand down his face and groaned. “I’m not even sure if it is something to be worried about.”

“Try me.”

Before he could second guess himself, Peter pulled the card out of his pocket and handed it to Bucky. He glanced over it, reading the words, before tapping it against his fist. “Kevin,” he said in a low voice.

Peter nodded. “He sent flowers to May. FRIDAY said he’s been calling her, texting her – a lot. Like, *a lot*.”

Bucky’s blue eyes seemed to grow a shade darker. Geez, how did he manage to convey so much with so few words.

“I know, I know, I should’ve let you beat the shit out of him. But I don’t want anyone going to jail or anything. Not you, not Tony. Not because of me.”

Bucky let out a breath and handed the card back to him.

“You need to talk to her. She might need help.”

Peter nodded. He needed to talk to May about what he had found out. Keeping secrets had done nothing but cause pain all around, and that was the last thing he wanted more of now. No more cloak and dagger stuff – not by him, and not by anyone else.

It wasn't until after dinner that Peter had the opportunity to talk to May alone.

He'd watched her throughout dinner; waiting for her to bring up the flowers to Tony and Pepper. She never mentioned anything. Not the flowers, not the phone calls.

Peter considered bringing it up in front of Tony and Pepper but something stopped him. There had to be a reason that she hadn't mentioned it to them.

His stomach did a small twist as he raised his hand and knocked on May's door.

"Come in," her voice called.

May was lying on her bed, already clad in her pyjamas, with her feet propped up on a pillow.

"Hey sweetie, come to watch 'True Crimes' with me?" She patted the bed next to her.

Peter smiled; it had always been their guilty pleasure. Ben hated it; said it gave him the creeps to hear about the lengths some people went to cover up their crimes.

He climbed up and slid in next to her, feeling the warmth radiating from her body. FRI had cued up an episode without being asked and she caught his hand in hers, linking their fingers.

The episode played for a few minutes and Peter hummed in the right places when May started her usual commentary.

After a few more minutes, he couldn't take it any more, and he slipped his fingers out of her grasp.

“Um, May?”

“Uh huh?” May’s eyes were on the screen still.

Peter cleared his throat. “FRI, please pause the TV.”

The screen stilled on a man’s face so it looked like he was almost mid sneeze.

May turned to him then with an inquisitive frown. He scooted around so he was sitting cross legged in front of her.

“You, um, you said that I should let you know if anything was bothering me?”

May sat up a bit at that. She reached out and rubbed his knee. “Of course sweetheart.”

Peter fumbled in his trouser pocket and pulled the card out, hesitating for a second before he handed it to her.

She didn’t even read the words, knowing what it was instantly. Her eyes hit the bed before looking back at Peter.

“He’s been contacting you?” Peter asked, even though he knew the answer.

“He seems to think he can charm his way back in with flowers, but it won’t work.” She patted his knee in reassurance. “I threw them right out.”

Peter waited for her to say more, but she just looked at him with a warm smile. She obviously wasn’t going to mention the rest. He lowered his head and looked up at her from under his eyebrows.

“I know about the calls and texts.”

Her cheeks flushed instantly. “Did you hack my phone?”

“Of course not!” Peter exclaimed, even though he totally would have if he could’ve gotten away with it. “FRI just told me how many calls from unknown numbers.”

May pushed a piece of hair behind her ear. “It’s nothing for you to worry about.”

Peter’s jaw clenched. “He’s not meant to contact us, May. The order of protection said that.”

“I know sweetie, and I haven’t been answering, I swear.” May tried to hold his hand but he pulled away.

“You want to go back to him. That’s why you haven’t told the Police.” Peter’s voice was full of resignation.

“No! Peter, oh my god, no! I could never.” Her look was so genuine that Peter relented and let her hold his hand.

“But why not say something then? To me, or to Tony and Pepper. You haven’t told them either, right?”

Her cheeks reddened further.

“I...I thought we were all supposed to be a team now. That’s what you said.” Peter lurched out. Was this how it had felt, not being fully in the know? It made him feel itchy.

May just sighed. “It’s complicated.”

“Are you still mad at them for not telling you? Is that it? It was me – I forced them...”. Peter desperately wanted them to be ok with each other. The idea that there might be barriers between them was like a knife to his gut.

“No, I’m not mad at them. Not really. I disagree with their choice, but I think I understand where

they were coming from.”

“Then, what is it?” Peter threw his arms up in a shrug.

“I didn’t want you to be worrying about what Kevin was doing. I knew if you’d stress out if you found out that he’d been calling and turning up at work —“

“—He did what?!” Peter shouted. What if Kevin hurt May? He was obviously capable.

“Calm down. Security put him out. He won’t try again. He just hates being ignored.”

“May, you have to tell Tony-“

“Peter, it’s my turn to protect you, ok? That’s my job!” Tears filled her eyes. “It should have been all along.”

Peter’s heart fell. She was trying to take it all on herself, like some sort of penance.

He wrapped his arms around her and she returned the gesture. She pulled away and wiped her eyes.

“God, I’m a mess. Maybe they shouldn’t have let you stay with me...” May mumbled, but of course Peter heard.

CPS had completed their investigation into May just a few days ago and had cleared her of any wrongdoing. It had been a relief, but it was obviously still playing on her mind.

“May, don’t say that. Nothing that happened was your fault.”

May didn’t say she agreed, but she also didn’t disagree, which was progress from the last few weeks. It’d been hard for Peter to see her so torn up- despite how she tried to hide it. She had to get to grips with all this new information that had been thrown at her and now she was grieving the loss of her relationship and her family. Alfie had started with a play therapist and, for the first

time, Peter thought maybe May should be talking to someone too.

“Can you please tell Tony and Pepper?” Peter pushed. “If he is turning up, harassing you...I’m worried about what he might do.”

“Kevin would never hurt me,” May said.

“You...you don’t really know that. I didn’t think he would ever hurt Alfie either...” Peter said, averting his eyes; the feeling of guilt still a solid weight in his stomach.

May looked at him; fresh tears suddenly shining in her eyes before falling down her cheeks. She wiped it off after a beat and cleared her throat.

“FRIDAY, please tell Tony and Pepper that we need to talk to them.”

Tony

Tony wiped his eyes and then winced as a spot of oil got into the corner of one.

“Shit,” Tony fumbled over to the sink, washing his hands and then his eyes.

Amateur mistake. He was obviously getting too old for these all nighters. He straightened up and his back let out a loud crack as if in confirmation of his thoughts.

Bucky had been happy to wait another day for his tune up once he’d heard what had happened and what Tony wanted to do instead. Pepper had gotten straight on the phone to the lawyers and the Police about Kevin’s violation of the protective order. Hopefully he’d get picked up today. With any luck, the judge would order him to spend the rest of the time until the trial in jail.

Tony picked up the project he'd been working on and headed to the kitchen: mulling over torture techniques he'd love to try on Kevin Hayes.

Everyone was in the kitchen doing the breakfast thing. The kids were chowing down on cereal, Pepper was already tapping furiously away on her laptop and May was scrolling through her phone; half a crust of toast left on the plate in front of her.

"Morning all!" Tony forced some joviality into his tone for the sake of the littlest people in the room.

All heads turned and smiled at him with varying wattage.

"Not sure you can say that, given I'm pretty certain you didn't sleep last night." Pepper arched an eyebrow at him but her eyes were sympathetic. He kissed Pepper on the head and ignored the underlying question.

"So!" He clapped his hands together. "I have some gifts for the Parker-Hayes contingent."

Both Peter and May's faces formed into the exact expression they wore when they thought he was about to be extravagant.

"Tony, I really think you and Pepper have done more than enough putting all of us up until we find a new place."

Tony waved her away like it was nothing; which if course, for him, it was. But he liked to think the same would have applied if he was penniless. They were family; no two ways about it and he'd always help them.

"Here." He walked around and stood between May and Peter, placing the devices on the countertop.

"A watch?" May looked confused.

“Well, yes, but more. Care to be my test dummy, Pete?” He flashed his trademark PR smile at the teen.

“Aren’t I always?” Peter intoned, looking like he’d had even less sleep than Tony but intrigued nonetheless.

“A dummy, yes...”

Ah, the poking out of the tongue by the Spiderling; result.

Tony took Peter’s arm and laid one of the ‘watches’ on his wrist. It immediately fitted itself perfectly around it.

“So yes, it is a watch. But it does a lot of other things, like monitor your vitals etc.”

“A fitness tracker?” May looked thoroughly confused and he didn’t blame her. He should just get to the point.

“Most important feature is right here.”

Tony held up Peter’s arm and twisted it to show May. “There is a small button there. If you are in danger, you tap it three times in a row and it will alert the Police, and the nearest Avenger, to your location.”

“Wow, and you just made these overnight?”

Tony shrugged. “Pepper and Morgan already have their own versions; I adapted ones for you three.”

His eyes were drawn to Peter, who hadn’t said anything but was staring hard at the device on his wrist. Tony had wanted to give him one a long time ago, but the kid always hated being tracked and had refused.

“Not that I’m not grateful, but this seems a bit like overkill, Tony.”

Peter’s head shot up at May’s words.

“They’re just for the short term. Until we know where he is...permanently.” Tony spoke the last part quietly, not wanting to say too much in front of the smaller kids.

May hesitated until she looked at Peter’s pained face.

“Please May,” Peter almost whispered; his doe-like eyes wide and serious.

She tilted her head at him and sighed. “Ok, just until this is all settled.”

She placed her arm forward and Tony jumped ahead and did the honours.

Tony stepped back and slung his arm around Peter’s tense shoulders. May didn’t seem too concerned about Kevin but it was obvious that his harassment had freaked Peter out. After all, the kid knew more than anyone what Kevin was like when he snapped.

Tony felt some of the tension in the teen’s body ease and he welcomed the warmth as Peter relaxed some of his weight against him.

They both watched as Pepper helped Alfie put his on and he and Morgan compared theirs.

Tony felt Peter’s arm slide around his waist to tighten the hold.

“Did you even sleep at all?” Peter murmured without looking at him.

Tony pressed a kiss into the kid’s dark waves. “I can now.”

After the mad news of this morning's hits milestone, I wanted to get this out to you asap in thanks. Hopefully I haven't made any glaring errors lol!

Chapter 37

Chapter Notes

Here you go - split a big chapter in two!

Special shout out to MsHermia for her help with this one and the next! If you haven't read any of her stuff, you are seriously missing out. *If They Knew All About You* and *Like You'd Know How it Works* are my faves of hers.

Tony

"Any updates FRI?"

"I'm afraid not, Boss." The AI's calming lilt did nothing to ease the tension that twisted Tony's stomach. "Would you like to see the tracking network?"

FRIDAY projected up an image in front of him without waiting for his response.

Tony had utilised his best facial recognition software and piggybacked onto the citywide CCTV network. They had come up with two hits on Kevin in the last 36 hours, but by the time the Police had gotten to the locations, the man had gone.

Tony bit his lip; Kevin had not been back to the apartment since his warrant had been issued. It didn't take a genius to figure out that someone must have tipped him off. Maybe they had the two times the Police had been sent to pick him up as well. Tony had stationed a discreet drone at the apartment just in case Kevin got complacent. Stranger things had happened. The lawyers (and Pepper) had gently reminded him that taking matters into his own hands could potentially disadvantage the case. It might end up being a risk he was willing to take.

"Sir," there was an urgency in the AI's tone. "Miss Potts requires you in the living room, right now."

Tony jogged his way there; stopping in the doorway to see a crying May huddled on the couch

with Pepper's arm around her. Peter was moving from foot to foot in front of them, like he didn't quite know what to do with himself.

"What happened?" he asked, walking forward.

Peter looked at him despondently. "He...Kevin...he took all the money."

"What?"

"He drained our bank account. All of it." May pulled her head out of her hands and looked at him; eyes red. "I mean, can he even do that?"

Pepper spoke up. "Was it a joint account?"

May nodded; gripping the snotty tissue in her fist.

Pepper's features settled into a grimace. "Then, legally, yes, I think he can."

"Why would he...? We saved all that money up for years; it was for Alfie. We've been putting more aside for the things we'll need for the baby for months. How could he do that to them?" May sounded wretched.

Before Tony could open his mouth and reassure her that he'd make sure that she and her kids would never want for anything; her phone rang. May glanced at the screen; her mouth setting into a hard line.

"FRIDAY, record this." May snapped up the phone and pressed the speaker button.

"Kevin?" she asked.

"May, baby." Kevin's voice came clear through the speakers. "I've missed hearing your voice. Did you like the peonies? They were always your favourite."

Tony watched Peter's whole body go rigid: his eyes planted to the floor.

Tony edged closer and Peter looked up at him: his eyes so tense. Tony gestured towards the door with a tilt of his head. The kid shouldn't be in here for this.

Peter's jaw tightened and he wrapped his arms around his body; he shook his head once sharply.

Tony sighed – did he really expect anything less? He pulled out his phone and tapped out a message to FRIDAY to trace the call.

“Why? Why did you do it?” May's voice wavered.

Kevin sighed: his mouth too close to the phone so it made a distorted sound. “Look, honey, I know you love him, but whatever he's told you is wrong. He went for me first. I –“

“Shut up!” May cut him off. “I don't want to hear more of your bullshit excuses about that. There is nothing you can say to justify any of it. The money, Kevin. You took *all* our money. How are we meant to...” May stopped, choking on the tears she was trying to hold back.

Tony's eyes flitted from May back to Peter. He'd remained in the same position, despite hearing the fucker's lies about him. Tony gritted his own teeth to stop himself speaking.

“Baby,” The man's voice slipped into a different tone; coated with so much honey and sugar it made his teeth hurt. “I just wanted you to talk to me. You wouldn't answer.”

So, it was a ploy. Unsurprising; manipulative prick.

“Then take the hint. I have nothing to say to you.”

“Sweetheart...”

“Just leave us alone. Stop calling, texting. It’s over, Kevin.” May’s voice was full of an almost hardened grief. It made his own heart clench.

“You don’t mean that, baby. Once this is all straightened out - ” He was cut off by May.

“ - Straightened out? Are you kidding me right now?” Tony kind of wished this was a video call so Kevin could clearly see the look of loathing on her face. “You broke his *bones*. On more than one occasion. You’re going to prison.”

“May, is that what he is telling you? There were no other times. That kid is messed up, you know that. I feel sorry for him, with all the shit he’s been through, but if he’s trying to say I abused him, then that is crap. It was just an isolated incident; and the courts will see that. We didn’t get on, sure, but I just tried to instil some boundaries and discipline for him, and he didn’t like it.”

Tony stepped closer to Peter again but stopped at touching him; the kid staring so hard at the ground like he could see through it.

May didn’t let Kevin’s lies derail her; “Well, I’m sure the jury will think differently.”

“It’s lies. They’ll see that.”

“No, they’ll see the evidence. The *video* evidence we have of all the marks you put on him.”

Peter hadn’t let May see the video but, with his permission, Tony had outlined what had been on it.

There was a pause.

Checkmate, motherfucker.

“Look, he spent almost as much time at Stark’s as he did at ours. The man has a history of violence and instability, maybe you should think about that before you decide to put this on me.”

Tony's fists clenched together hard, shooting pains up his wrists. That piece of shit. He was about to open his mouth when Pepper shot up; her finger to her mouth and her eyes pleading with him.

If Tony had literally bit his tongue in that moment, he wouldn't have been surprised. Instead, he turned away and let out a few shallow breaths as he paced to the other side of the room and back.

"And what about your own son, huh? Or did you forget about the handprint across his face? I can send you the photos if you like?" May's voice was like ice.

"I didn't mean for that to happen. I'll explain to him, he'll forgive me."

Tony's stomach twisted. The truth was that Alfie probably would. Tony remembered doing the same when he was that age; until it became too hard, too frequently and he grew to realise it wasn't part of love. Alfie wouldn't get to learn that. He wouldn't let that happen; and he knew that May wouldn't either.

"I'm hanging up now." May's voice was hard; disgust as evident in her tone as it was on her face.

"Please angel, what about the baby, what about Alfie? Think about them." There was a hint of desperation in his previously clinical tone.

"Fuck you." May slammed her finger against the off button and burst into tears. Pepper enveloped her in a hug instantly.

Tony looked to Peter; who was still frozen to the spot; except this time there was a light trail of blood running down his arms; his fingernails digging into his flesh.

Tony moved slowly, picking some tissues out of the box on the table.

"Pete?" He said softly. The kid looked spooked enough as it was, best to play it safe. Peter's head lifted slowly; an almost blank expression on his face.

Tony reached out tentatively and brushed his fingers against Peter's clenched hands.

“Can you ease up there, bud?” Tony kept his tone light. “Let’s try not to add any more colours to this rug than Morgan already has with her markers.”

Peter let him start to open his fingers until he suddenly seemed to come back to himself and realised what had happened; opening up his fists and pulling his hands away quickly.

“Shit,” Peter said, taking a tissue and pressing it to the small crescent blood dotted marks on one arm while Tony did the same on the other side. “Sorry, thanks.”

“No problem,” Tony replied. The bleeding had stopped; it would be superficial for most people and for Peter would have completely healed in the time it took him to make a cup of coffee.

“Peter?”

They both turned at May’s voice and she reached an arm towards him. Peter moved away speedily, sinking into the sofa next to May, putting his arms around her.

Tony tapped his glasses. “Any luck on the trace, FRI?”

“Of course Boss, I have notified NYPD and sent some surveillance drones to that location.”

“Good girl. Send that phone call to my lawyers and the police as well. Keep me posted.”

Pepper came over and slipped an arm around his waist.

“You okay?” she whispered, as they both looked at May and Peter; the teen whispering what he could only imagine were reassuring things in her ear.

“I will be when they have him in custody.”

They both shared a weighted look and he pulled her tighter. The net was closing in on Kevin; it

was only a matter of time.

Peter

The sound of May crying came clearly through the wall. Well, clearly for him.

She had been withdrawn for the rest of the evening since the phone-call with Kevin. She's excused herself to bed pretty early, stating exhaustion but evidently hadn't been sleeping.

Peter wasn't surprised by Kevin's denial of what had happened. People always try to justify their own behaviour and Kevin was no different.

That wasn't what was bothering him. Kevin's words about Tony kept repeating in his mind. Would he really be able to pin a reasonable doubt that it wasn't him, but could've been Tony, that hurt him? And Peter had never forgot the more unsavoury things Kevin had implied about his and Tony's relationship in the past. The media would lap it up.

Sure, for the most recent incident, Tony had witnessed some of it but for the rest, it was essentially just his word against Kevin's. What if they believed that he had hit Kevin first? The guy was a cop; and from what he had found from his own hacking, he had a pretty clean record. Would a jury even believe him? He was just a kid after all.

May's tears hadn't abated; super hearing feeling like only a curse right now. He pulled himself out of bed and went out into the hall to her door.

He paused as he was about to knock. What the hell could he even say to make this better for her? Her family was destroyed, her husband avoiding being arrested for breaking a restraining order. One look at him would just be another reminder that he was the catalyst to this whole shit show. It's not like Kevin was ever a problem for her or Alfie before he came along.

Peter let his head rest against the door. He was starting to believe it hadn't been his fault. He didn't quite feel it in his bones, but it was starting to settle more. Still, the 'what if's' were hard to shake. What if he'd told after the first hit? What if he'd been better at hiding it? What if he had just shown Kevin that he was Spider-man, he would have backed the fuck off; maybe never laid a hand on him.

He could hear May's hiccupping breaths now followed by a blowing of her nose. Once Kevin was in custody; at least they could all rest easy, at least until the trial came.

He swallowed; his throat feeling restricted and scratchy. The idea of facing him on the stand made his skin crawl. He felt like he'd used up all of his bravery when he'd pushed back against the man back at the apartment. Just hearing his voice earlier had made it official, Peter Parker was still just as scared as he had been when he was under the man's boot.

Peter Parker was.

Peter set off at speed to the lab. Tony had gone to bed when he supposedly had so he expected the room to be empty. FRIDAY opened the doors for him without question as he advanced, and he walked straight in. The lab was in its usual 'organised mess' state of being but was free of people. The bots chirped and whirred and started to come towards him for their usual hugs.

"Not right now you guys." Peter all but snapped and was met with the halt of their tyres and what half-sounded like despondent responses.

"FRI, can you please show me the tracking data and the location of that call from earlier today?"

There was a beat. "All information is stored on Mr Stark's private server and would require his authorisation."

Peter rolled his eyes. He'd have to just find Kevin himself.

"FRI, can I access my suit?" Tony might have locked that away too, but it was worth asking.

"Of course, Peter. It is located in compartment 16C. Would you like me to show you where it is?"

“Yes,” Peter responded with relief. He followed the lights she illuminated along the floor to the other side of the room and a compartment opened as soon as he got there. He grabbed the suit; the silky material so familiar in his hands. He pulled it onto his body and hit the spider on the front; it shrunk to fit him, feeling like a second skin.

The web shooters were in there too and he took them out, checking them for any damage since his last outing. Not that he wanted to think much about that.

Peter went over to his work bench and pulled out the drawer. There were rows of web fluid lined up; a batch he’d made not long before he’d stopped going out. They would still be viable for a while. He loaded up his shooters and slipped a few extra vials into the integrated pockets. That should do it.

He grabbed the mask and turned around; taking only two steps before he froze.

Tony was leant in the doorway, both hands loosely in the pockets of his pyjama pants.

“It’s a bit late for a pleasure ride, kid.” Tony’s eyes were soft but there was a hint of tension around the edges.

Peter shifted his weight. “Yeah, well, it’s about time I got back out there.”

“Oh, I’m sure the people of Queens would be delighted,” Tony casually walked past Peter to his desk behind. Peter turned as he did, watching as he picked up a vial of web fluid from the drawer and twirled it in his fingers, before settling his weight back against the desk.

“So, who do you think you might come up against tonight?” Tony’s eyes were on his. “Some burglars, maybe some car thieves. Hey, you know what, maybe even someone avoiding their warrant...”

Peter looked away.

“Uh uh, eyes up here.”

Peter forced himself to look at Tony.

“What are you doing, kid?” Tony’s voice was gentle and warm but all he could hear was that one word. *Kid, Kid, Kid*. He was trying to make things right; safe for May. This wasn’t a game to him.

“You know what I’m doing, Tony.” Peter folded his arms across his chest in a display of mock confidence. “I’m going to find him and hand him over to the Police.”

“New York is a big place. You think you can do more to find him than the Police?”

“He’s one of them Tony, I’m surprised they even arrested him in the first place.”

“That’s a bit unfair. We’ve got no evidence that they’ve been anything but straight down the line so far.” Tony countered with a tilt of his head.

Peter couldn’t deny that. They’d been supportive in the interviews. But still, they had to be. They couldn’t be seen to be siding with a child abuser. But his friends at the Precinct could be a different matter.

“You think you can do more than I am to try find him?” Tony asked, an eyebrow raised.

Peter deflated a bit. Tony was giving it his all. He’d shown him the tracking and the level of, frankly, highly illegal methods he was using.

“God, Tony, no. I know you are...you’re going above and beyond. It’s not a slight on you...”

Tony held his hand up. “Hey, I get it. I get the need to take matters into your own hands. Believe me. But let’s play this out.”

Tony took a step towards him, again twirling the little vial between his fingers like he might have been a magician in a previous life.

“Let’s say that you, and by you, I mean Spider-man, tracks this low life down. Maybe he takes him in easy, maybe he doesn’t. Maybe he ends up with a few well-deserved bruises, or worse.” Peter felt heat start to rush up through his cheeks. “Don’t you think it will seem a bit strange to the Police that Spider-man has suddenly taken an interest in bringing in warrant avoiders? How did he even know this man was wanted but the Police?”

Tony let out a sigh. “Maybe someone starts to connect some dots, *‘hmmm, Spider-man hasn’t been around for a few weeks’* and *‘oh look, that is in the same timeframe as this entire abuse case’*. You got people making more connections between Peter Parker and Spider-man that I *know* you don’t want out there.”

Tony was right but something in him wanted to just fight it a little.

“They already know you are involved; they will probably just think that you just asked another Avenger for help. Would make sense it would be Spider-man when it’s in his neighbourhood.”

Tony stepped back; his hands wide. “Maybe...maybe. But is that a risk you are willing to take?”

Peter looked down. Was it?

“Would you even be considering it if you hadn’t been listening to May crying?”

Peter’s head snapped up and he frowned.

“Just a hunch. Finally remembered about the super hearing.”

Peter clenched the mask in his hand and looked down at it. It didn’t have the answers. He just wanted to stop her pain; it’s all that he ever wanted since Ben. Why does he always seem to be the one who causes it? He wants to protect her and he just wants it to be over.

“I just want to do the right thing, but I don’t even know what that is anymore...” Peter tugged a wad of his hair in his hand. “This is...this is so fucking hard. When does it get easier, Tony?”

It only took Tony a few seconds to close the gap between them and then he had an armful of his mentor. Solid and real and there. Ready to stop him from making bad decisions and support good ones.

“Come on, screw how late it is. Let’s get some cookies and hot chocolate.”

Well, sometimes.

Peter smiled into Tony’s shoulder and let himself be led away to the kitchen.

Chapter 38

Chapter Notes

I wasn't planning on posting this until tomorrow and then I realised that for the many American readers out there, it is Thanksgiving today.

So here is a little gift for you all, a second chapter less than 24 hours later!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Peter

“Mr Parker!”

Peter jolted awake and there was a burst of laughter from the class around him.

Peter looked up to see an incandescent Mr Phillips looking back down at him. Oh crap, he'd actually fallen asleep. Well, in his defence, it was English and the teacher had just been droning on and on. Peter looked up at the man's face; his face beet red and his eyes glaring with an unconcealed rage. Hmm, probably best not to mention that.

“Um,” Peter cleared his throat. “I'm sorry, Mr Phillips.”

He let out a harsh huff. “Detention with me after school.”

“But sir...” Peter started but was silenced by the increase in glare from the man.

“The alternative would be a chat with Principal Morita about your lack of attention in my class. I'm sure he'd like to inform your guardians of your inability to stay awake.” Mr Phillips crossed his arms across his chest. “So, what will it be?”

“Detention is fine, sir.” Peter gritted his teeth.

Bucky was meant to be meeting him after school – which was only 25 mins away now. Apparently he'd found an Italian place in Brooklyn he remembered from back in the 40's that was still trading, and he wanted to check it out. Peter highly suspected that this was a combined plan with Tony to keep Peter busy and therefore not tempted into going hunting in his Spider-suit. But he didn't mind, Bucky was pretty good company – seemingly happy to let him ramble on about stuff — and if it included a meal, well, he would hardly complain.

Mr Phillips went back to the front of the class and Peter decided to dance with the devil as he slipped his phone onto his lap. Without looking, he typed out a message to Bucky:

***PP:** Sorry but I just got detention after school so I'm going to be like an hour later. Can meet you there if easier? Or reschedule. Sorry.*

Five minutes later, his lap purred.

***BB:** No worries. I'm already down this way so I'll just take in the delights of Queens. Oh wait, it doesn't have any. #brooklynrules*

***PP:** Yeah, yeah. 😊*

So, detention sucks. Mr Phillips took great pleasure in getting Peter to tidy up areas of the room; organising piles of books and moving them to the storage cupboard. He didn't seem to care about the cast on Peter's arm and how difficult it made him. Of course, his arm was fine now and the cast was only for show – Tony had fashioned a removable one that he had to wear for a few more weeks – but Mr Phillips didn't know that. What a prick.

After about 45 minutes, Peter was following Mr Phillips out to the back of the school with a large box balanced in his hands. He followed him to the now fairly empty teachers parking lot and manhandled it into the boot of Mr Phillips' car.

“That will do then, Peter.” Mr Phillips opened his car door. “I don't want to see you sleeping in my class again or there will be more serious consequences.”

Peter nodded solemnly. “Yes sir.”

Mr Phillips returned his nod and then swept into his car and away; driving more like a NASCAR racer than a high school English teacher.

Peter whipped his phone out and had almost finished sending a message to Bucky to say he was done, when he heard a familiar voice:

“Getting in trouble at school again, hey? Can’t say that I’m surprised.”

Peter turned slowly; his heart-rate climbing as soon as his eyes landed on the face that belonged to the voice.

Kevin looked haggard. He usually dressed pretty decently in smart jeans and shirts, with his hair well kept. But today he looked tired and unkempt, with stained trousers and a crumpled top, which had the effect of making him seem more dangerous. Peter’s mind whirled with all the possible reasons that Kevin could have to be here right now.

“You shouldn’t be here,” Peter half mumbled.

Kevin laughed and took a step forward. Peter moved back instantly; his fingers fumbling against the watch on his wrist. He tried to be discreet about it, but his hands were shaking. Did he shake this much when he was fighting The Vulture, when he was up against Thanos’ army? He couldn’t remember. He pressed the button three times and hoped for the best.

“You don’t get to tell me what to do, Peter. I thought you’d realised that a long time ago.”

The watch vibrated against his wrist. Did that mean it had worked or that he hadn’t done it right?

“Hey, I’m talking to you.”

Peter jerked his head back up. He needed to focus. Kevin was just a man. Just a man who

couldn't hurt him. Why didn't his shaking body get the message?

"The order of protection says you aren't to come near me and you're breaking that," his voice came out stronger than he thought it would.

Kevin laughed again. "What's it matter? They've already put out one warrant, what's another matter?"

Peter didn't like the forced joviality in Kevin's tone. He wasn't someone who didn't like to have control, so he must be here for a reason.

"What do you want?"

"I want my wife and family back." Kevin levelled him with a dark look. "The ones you took from me."

"I didn't do anything."

"You've been making shit up." Kevin pulled himself up taller, resting his hands on his hips. "And what, now you've got some pictures of 'bruises' I put on you? Please."

"We were both there. You know what you did," Peter said calmly.

"I taught you, is what I did. But you couldn't take it like a man, you had to go off and run your mouth to your middle aged boyfriend."

Peter's fists clenched. If he brought Tony into this, he might not keep his cool.

"You didn't teach me anything; you almost killed me." Peter's jaw clenched in tandem with his fists now.

Kevin scoffed – *scoffed*. "Nothing I gave you was anything worse than I had growing up. You were just a fucking pussy about it."

Peter paused. Kevin had never said anything about that before. He'd been hit growing up too? It did seem like it came naturally to him. Had he spent nights nursing bruises? Had he spent nights afraid to go to sleep?

"If that's true, then I feel sorry for you that you had to go through that too." Peter's voice wavered again before becoming stronger; "But that doesn't mean you should have done it to me."

Kevin's eyes widened and he took several steps towards Peter now. Peter moved quickly, making sure he arced around so that he was closer to the covered walkway that led to the front of the school, to where he hoped Bucky would soon be arriving to pick him up.

"I don't need you to feel sorry for me, you little punk." Kevin's face set into a deeper scowl. "I need you to retract your ridiculous statement."

Peter swallowed. "I'm not going to do that."

"Really? Have you really thought about how this is going to play out in court?" Kevin laughed eerily again. "I've been a cop for over 10 years with a clean record. You just got suspended for fighting in school. Do you think the jury will have a hard time believing that you tried to hit me first?"

"I think that they will. Especially when they see all the videos I took, including one of you laying into me."

Kevin paused before cracking a smile. "Bullshit. Even if that existed, it wouldn't be admissible in court."

Peter wavered. It would, wouldn't it?

"I d-don't believe you."

Kevin grinned again. "Even then, you spend so much time at Stark's, it could be him putting bruises on you. You went to live with him, after all. Bet you have to do more than get on your knees for him now though, huh? Maybe on your back too. I bet the jury would love to hear about

that. There are tons of photos of him with young guys back in the day. The press would eat it up.”

“Leave Tony out of this.” Peter’s voice was low and he could feel heat shoot up his back as he stared hard.

Kevin cocked his head. “Touched a nerve?”

Just in reach of his hearing, he could make out the faint whirr of a siren. *Please can it be headed here.*

Peter had backed up to the end of the walkway. All he had to do was turn and run and he would be away. But if he could just stick it out for a few minutes then the police would get him in custody and it would all be over. May and Alfie would be safe from him. He just needed to keep him talking for a few more minutes.

“I get that you hated me, but what did Alfie do for you to smack him?” Peter asked.

Kevin wasn’t the only one capable of hitting a nerve. Kevin’s face washed with regret.

“I didn’t mean to.”

“That’s what you said to me the first time, too.”

Kevin looked off to the side for a moment; as if he was remembering that first time too, or hell, maybe something from his own childhood. Peter was done trying to understand the man. It hadn’t made a difference back then and it wouldn’t make a difference now.

The sirens were close now. Hopefully that should do it.

Peter started to turn but a meaty hand grabbed onto his shoulder and pulled him around.

“Don’t touch me!”

Peter pushed the arm away and Kevin fell back a few steps but it didn't deter him. He came forward again; his finger wagging in Peter's direction.

"You're gonna take back your statement and then leave me, May, Alfie and the baby alone. Understand?"

Peter shook his head. "It's over Kevin. She's done with you."

Peter turned again, but Kevin spoke.

"I'll tell her about how you left Ben to die then, shall I?"

A flood of ice went through his chest: an automatic response, before his brain caught up. The smile had spread completely across his face by the time he turned around.

"I already told her. She understood, so your threats won't work on me, not anymore."

Kevin looked cowed by this for a moment. The ace he obviously thought he had up his sleeve had just turned out to be a joker.

"It's over, Kevin. Just turn yourself in."

Kevin looked at him and for a second it looked like he was really seeing him. His face was a mixture of sadness and despair. Peter felt a glimmer of sympathy for him; a man who was about to lose his family, and for a time at least, his freedom. That sympathy lasted about as long as Kevin's contrition did; a blazingly angry look coming across his face and his arm reaching for Peter's throat.

It was his preferred move; one that Peter was used to. Used to feeling the rough callouses of the man's fingers wrap around the soft, lump of his Adam's apple and squeezing until there was no air; til there was nothing else but panic and the thrum of his own heartbeat in his ears.

But Peter didn't have to put up with it anymore. He didn't need to protect anyone, he didn't need to be afraid; even though adrenaline pumped through him at an ever growing pace.

Just before the hand reached his throat, he blocked it with his cast, grabbing Kevin's wrist with his other hand, twisting and pushing it back into a wrist lock. He applied downward pressure with his other hand. It was clunky to do with the cast but it worked – forcing Kevin to his knees with a cry of pain.

“Fuck, fuck! Peter, let go of me.” Kevin shouted. He tried to move out of it but all Peter had to do was to move his hand slightly and push down and the change of angle was enough to make Kevin cry out in pain.

Kevin looked up at him; this time with a face of pain and fear. Was this what Kevin had seen on his face all those times he'd hovered over him? He'd seen that look and just kept on deciding to hurt him?

He took in Kevin's face. The face that had literally haunted his dreams. He was weak and pathetic and so full of shit that he felt dirty just touching him.

Peter could feel the man's erratic pulse, could hear the thundering of his heartbeat. It was an odd sensation, having this much power in his hands, even when he hadn't used his enhanced strength. It wasn't like he wasn't used to subduing criminals. Hell, that was all he ever did as Spider-man; but it was mostly with his webs, not up close and personal like this.

The siren was pretty close now and even in his intent focus on Kevin, he could hear the thunder of one set of feet coming from behind him but his Spidey sense didn't flare. They slowed a foot away and didn't speak as they came to his shoulder; the heartbeat of this person rapidly trying to decrease. Kevin looked up as much as he could from his stress position and Peter saw his eyes widened with further fear.

Peter let his eyes leave Kevin for a second to see who it was.

Bucky was looking at him; his cool, blue eyes assessing. After a millisecond, Peter saw the tension in his shoulders loosen.

“Alright, Peter?” Bucky asked, as if they were on a casual picnic.

Peter shrugged and just that movement alone caused a gasp from Kevin.

“He hurt you?”

“Tried to.”

Bucky nodded solemnly and then, putting his hands behind his back, he moved forward and looked down at the grip Peter had on Kevin’s hand and arm.

“That’s looking really good. Just like we practised.” Bucky reached forward and adjusted his finger slightly. Kevin groaned.

“That’s right, “ Bucky commented again, “if you just tweak it a little to the left, you’d break it without much force needed at all.”

Kevin let out a mangled noise, that was a mix between a protest and a panic.

“No one would blame you if you did,” Bucky said, quietly enough for only him to hear.

Peter took a breath; in and out. It would be really easy and so, so satisfying. Kevin was looking up at him again; a look of terror in his eyes. It should make him feel good, right? That Peter had made him feel this way - some sort of victory? But it didn’t; it just felt hollow and all wrong.

He heard the sound of several other sets of feet making their way towards them down the walkway; Bucky must have too as he turned towards the sound - his body alert in a way he must have been trained to be.

Peter moved his hand higher, it manipulated the man’s wrist into an unnatural position and Kevin let out another cry of pain; his eyes frantically searching Peter’s for mercy. Peter tightened his grip once more before he locked eyes with the man that had caused so much pain in his life.

“Stay away from my family.”

Peter let go of his hand and let him fall to the ground as the Police officers came out of the walkway.

Tony

I'm having a heart attack. A real and true goddamn heart attack.

Tony was sure of it; the way his blood was racing through his veins and his breaths were short and the pain in his left arm was spreading at an alarming rate. But he didn't have time for that. Imminent death could wait. He had to get to his kid - *now*.

There was a police cruiser blocking the entrance to the teachers car park where the location beacon had shown Peter was.

Actually, yes, this was his second heart attack; the first had come when FRIDAY had informed him that Peter's watch alarm had been activated. He was in the car with Happy - he'd ducked out of the meeting early so he could join them at this Brooklyn joint for dinner, or at least dessert. He'd been expecting tiramisu not a helping of existential terror.

He'd heard the audio, every word of it, and he almost wished his tech was Hammer standard so he hadn't had to hear every word in clear Stark surround sound.

Happy had almost hit a fire hydrant when they'd heard the lies Kevin had vomited about him and Peter's relationship. It made him sick to his stomach.

He shouldn't have listened to Pepper - he should still be wearing the nano housing unit. Just in case. But instead he'd had to rely on Happy's breakneck driving – that being quicker than the suit shooting across from the Tower, though he sent for that anyway.

Logically, he knew that Bucky was there; that Peter was safe, but he needed to see him with his

own eyes, to feel the warmth of his body under his own fingers.

Happy had barely stopped before he wrenched the door to the car open and speed walked into the lot. There were two squad cars pulled into the small car park as well as easily eight cops milling around. He idly wondered how many had come to pick Kevin up, or if they were there in numbers for fear of what the Winter Soldier might do. Barnes might have been exonerated but people were still plenty wary of him. As they should be where his defence of Peter was concerned. Watching the Soldier's instinctive protectiveness of Peter had been an unexpected, but not unwelcome, side effect of this whole sordid business.

He caught sight of Bucky now. He was standing by a walkway, angled slightly to the side but his body was tense, like he was guarding it. That was where Peter would be.

Tony cut in that direction. He passed close enough to one of the police cars to see Kevin inside, handcuffed but seemingly unharmed. Shame. He thought Bucky would have been all over that.

"Um, Mr Stark, can we..." A timid voice came from one of the Police Officers.

Tony didn't stop and certainly didn't look in his direction. "I'm going to talk to the kid, then I'll talk to you."

Bucky had seen him and was striding towards him. He obviously wanted to relay stuff not in front of Peter.

"He's ok," Bucky said, stopping in front of Tony, his face stern. "No injuries. He didn't give the guy a chance; put him in a wrist lock."

"And you didn't...?" Tony cocked his head in the direction of the police cruiser Kevin was in.

"Tempted," the man's voice ground out, "but Peter had it handled, so I let him."

Tony nodded at that.

"Police tried to question him straight away, but I told them they had to wait til you got here, or his

Aunt. They didn't seem to push me much on that." There was a faint smile on one side of Bucky's mouth and Tony matched it. He could imagine how persuasive Bucky's combination of words and death stare had been. They must have pissed their pants.

"Thanks Buck," Tony started to move towards Peter but Bucky put a gentle hand on his arm.

"He's very quiet — won't engage in conversation." Bucky's usually cold eyes displayed worry and affection in equal measure.

Tony took a breath and nodded before taking himself over to the walkway.

Peter was a few feet down, leant against the brick wall of the school, arms wrapped around himself like he often did when he was stressed. He was staring ahead, though Tony thought that he must have heard him coming.

Tony slowly got closer until he must at least be in the kid's peripheral vision.

"Hey kid," Tony said quietly, "how are you doing?"

There was a long pause. Long enough that Tony was about to talk again when Peter responded, softly:

"I'm okay."

Peter didn't look at him so he edged closer again.

"Yeah?"

He didn't look it; he looked pale as fuck and like he might collapse onto the floor any second.

Tony reached out his hand; his fingers almost brushing Peter's shoulder before the kid did a full body flinch away from him.

Tony's throat tightened and he tried not to let tears push into his eyes. He hated it. Hated seeing Peter like this. Hated seeing him so scared, especially of him.

"Ok buddy, no touching. That's fine. I won't try to do that again – not til you tell me I can."

Peter didn't say anything but his hands seemed less clenched around his arms. It had only been 20 minutes since this had gone down; he was maybe in some sort of shock; an adrenaline come-down.

Tony moved so that he was across from him; so that he could see him but wasn't too close. His eyes roamed Peter's body. Bucky was right, there were no outward injuries. It was a miracle really. Kevin could have had a gun or anything. Maybe he hadn't seen Peter as enough of a threat to require one but whatever the reason was, he was relieved. As much as one could be in this situation.

After a moment of silence, where he could only hear their heavy breaths and distant voices – one being Happy telling some cops to '*have some goddamn patience*' – Tony needed to speak. Needed to have verbal confirmation there were no injuries.

"Pete, are you hurt at all? Did he hurt you?"

Peter lifted his gaze off the floor and looked at Tony. He swallowed like his mouth was dry as dirt, which maybe it was.

"No, I'm not hurt." He lifted his head higher again, making full eye contact with him. His eyes were glazed but Tony saw them rapidly reigniting.

"I didn't let him hurt me." Peter's voice was stronger now. He pulled himself up off the wall and took an uneasy step towards Tony. "I didn't let him hurt me, Tony." He repeated, his voice strong and clear.

Peter made it two full strides towards him before Tony could take one and threw himself into Tony's arms. Tony held him close enough to feel his rapid heartbeat against his sternum; beating against the scar tissue where his arc reactor used to lie. Tony cradled his head, pushing it deep enough into his neck that he could feel the boy's tears on his skin.

“You did good, kid.” Tony coughed out; fingers stroking through his hair. “You did really good.”

Chapter End Notes

Hope some of you got to read this whilst settling on the couch after a mammoth Thanksgiving feast 😊

And to the rest of us out in the world - on a normal Thursday evening...!

Thoughts as always appreciated!

Chapter 39

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Peter

“Pass me the 3/16””

Peter passed the tool over to Tony before going back to his own project. He just needed to finish connecting the wires...

“Pete, that screwdriver by your elbow...”

“Hold on.” Peter pressed his tongue to the roof of his mouth as he concentrated.

“Hold on? I thought you were meant to be my intern.”

“Uh huh.”

He kept his hand steady as he carefully guided the wire into the port. His sense flared and he dodged out of the way of what turned out to be an oily rag. He flicked his gaze to this mentor, who had a big shit eating grin on his face.

“Ton-y,’ he whined. “I’m just trying to finish.”

He let out a huff of breath as Tony came closer.

“Just trying to finish, huh?” Tony’s voice vibrated over his shoulder. “Need steady hands?”

Peter threaded the wire into the case and clicked it into place. Just one more.

“So, you wouldn’t want to be, I don’t know, tickled.”

Fingers found his side and he jerked away from them, dropping the wires in his hand.

Tony’s face was full of glee as Peter backed away and he followed.

“Tony…” Peter tried to stay mad, but Tony’s face was so full of fun that he couldn’t.

He yelped as Tony caught him again, tickling him mercilessly, causing him to land on the ground.

“I yield, I yield!” Tony let him go with a laugh.

Ever since Tony had realised that his heightened senses left him vulnerable to tickles, he would use this tactic to distract Peter whenever he wanted his attention.

“Child!” Peter moaned at Tony as he took his hand to get up. “Dum-E make sure he gets extra oil in his next coffee.”

The bot whirred in compliance.

“Traitor,” Tony muttered in his direction and the little bot scampered off.

“Boss, Miss Potts says that ‘if you don’t come up for dinner now, she will initiate her “Potts 24-hour lockdown protocol.” FRIDAY’s voice intoned from above.

Tony paled. “Crap, Underoos, come on, we can’t go 24 hours without the lab again.”

Peter grinned at Tony’s obvious fear of his wife, and followed him to the elevator.

“Cutting it close boys,” Pepper’s voice was cool as she laid out the plates on the counter top.

Tony came and kissed her on the cheek. “Thank you for dinner sweetheart. I know you cooked as it smells edible.”

“Hey!” May protested weakly from the other side of the counter as she served up the veggie burgers.

“Where are Morgalf?” Peter said as he pulled himself up into the chair, snagging a piece of cucumber from the salad before May could slap his hand away.

“I keep telling you that nickname isn’t going to stick,” Tony said, sliding in next to him, not managing to dodge May’s hand as he copied Peter. He drew his slapped hand back with a hiss, which earned him an eye roll from May before she handed him the salad tongs. “Leave the nicknames to the Maestro.”

“You know everyone hates your nicknames, right?” Peter said, raising an eyebrow good-naturedly.

“That is blasphemy, Underoos,” Tony said as he picked up his burger.

“Still with the God complex...”

“To answer your question,” Pepper interrupted their banter, serving herself some salad, “Happy took them out to the movies.”

“On a school night?” Peter mused in-between bites. He looked up then to see May and Pepper exchanging glances.

Peter suddenly didn’t feel hungry. He put his fork down.

“What is going on?” His heart pounded.

Tony looked up at his tone and looked across at the two women. Peter noticed his back suddenly straighten.

Pepper looked expectedly at May, who shook her head ever so slightly.

“Pep,” Tony’s voice held concern. He obviously wasn’t privy to whatever was about to unfold.

Pepper folded her hands in her lap. “We had a phone call from the lawyers today.”

Peter felt a lump rise in his throat.

“Mr Hayes is considering pleading guilty.”

Peter frowned. The conversation he’d had with Kevin not a week ago was still firmly in his mind. He’d seemed pretty certain that Peter wouldn’t be able to prove everything. “Why would he do that?”

“I had our lawyers send over the evidence you collected, as well as the CCTV from school and the audio from the watch. I can only imagine that has had an impact on his decision,” Pepper said coolly.

They’d been lucky that the school video clearly showed Kevin grabbing him and then going for his throat – that along with the audio had been more than enough for a judge to agree that Kevin had violated the order of protection and had to stay in jail until the hearing. It had also added another charge – witness intimidation.

Peter relaxed. “That is...that’s good, right?” No trial...”

He really didn’t want to get up in front of a bunch of strangers and talk about what Kevin did to him for all those months. He looked between the adults but none of them looked anything but tense.

“Plead guilty to what exactly?” Tony’s voice was as sharp as a knife.

Pepper’s mouth tightened. “He is willing to plead guilty if we drop the charges from first degree to second degree assault.”

Peter watched as Tony’s jaw clenched.

“W-what does that mean – in reality?” Peter pushed out, flicking his eyes to May, who was staring off into the middle distance with a haunted expression.

“It means he is trying to get away with almost killing you,” Tony said, anger bubbling into his tone.

Pepper ignored him and carried on, her voice softer. “It’s still a felony charge, but it would carry a lesser sentence.”

“Right,” Peter replied feeling numb. “How long would it be if we did do that?”

“If we accept the lesser charge, we’d agree with his lawyers that it has to be no less than the maximum sentence, which would be seven years. Though ultimately, it would be up to the judge. If we don’t accept the change in charges, he could be in prison for up to fifteen years.”

Peter couldn’t help but go to the negative; Kevin would get fifteen years *if* he was convicted. If he managed to place enough doubt – whether by implicating Tony or other means — then that meant there was a chance he would get away with it. Seven years in exchange for his three months of hell. Despite all he’d been through, it still seemed like a long time.

“Will what he’s charged with affect if he gets custody of Alfie and Splodge later on?”

Pepper frowned. “We did request him to terminate his parental rights, but he refused. When he gets out, he’ll be able to apply for custody and visitation rights. The lawyers seem confident that given that violence was perpetrated against a minor in his charge, and his own son, that he will be unlikely to get anything other than supervised visits, if that.”

Pepper reached for May's hand, locking their fingers together.

"When that time comes, we'll have the best lawyers on our side making sure he doesn't get near them," Tony added, his look stern.

There was an uneasy silence amongst them all.

"May..."

May looked up at Peter's words. He couldn't help but notice the dark marks under her eyes that had deepened over the weeks that they'd been living at the tower.

"What do you want to do?"

She frowned gently at him. "That can't be my decision, Peter. I – *we* – will be guided by whatever you want, sweetheart. It has to come from you."

Peter looked back down at the table again, not meeting anyone's eyes. What did he want? Safety, security, May's happiness. More than anything he wanted it to be over, he wanted...peace.

"You can take some time to think about it, Pete," Tony said softly, "you don't have to decide right now."

"I don't want a trial. Take the lesser charge." Peter was surprised by how firmly the words sounded when they came out of his mouth.

He didn't have to look at the three adults to see them tense slightly before relaxing.

Peter could feel Tony's eyes on him but he didn't dare look at him. He knew Tony would be disappointed in him.

"OK then," Pepper said gently, "I'll call the lawyers later on and let them know."

He pushed his food around this plate as the others started cautiously eating.

“There was some good news today, Peter.”

He could hear how May was trying to sound cheerful. He knew her forced tone when she used it, but she still seemed to think that he was a child who didn’t know the different inflection.

He forced himself to look up at her and neutralise his expression. “Yeah?”

“Pepper took off her lunch break and we looked around a few of those apartments I showed you.”

May had been looking for somewhere for them to live. She didn’t want to go back to the apartment after everything that had happened there, and Tony was helping her get out of the lease. Well, knowing him, he probably just bought out her contract without mentioning it. May had reluctantly accepted financial help from Tony and Pepper. Until the divorce was finalised, she’d have little income and soon enough she’d be on maternity leave. It would be a struggle with one reduced income and three children. She was a proud person, but she wouldn’t put her pride ahead of the needs of her children.

Peter feigned interest as she held out her phone to him. “This one was the best one. Three beds and two baths – I don’t have to share with a stinky teenager anymore.”

Peter forced a smile that belied the stone that settled in his stomach. “Looks great.”

“You could come and see it tomorrow. If you approve, I’ll sign on the dotted line.”

“I don’t need to see it,” Peter said, handing the phone back. “It looks good.”

The biggest smile that Peter had seen on May’s face since this whole sorry incident made the stomach stone seem a little lighter for a moment.

“Brilliant. They said we can move in at the end of next week.”

The stone plummeted.

“Great,” he replied, trying not to grit his teeth.

Tony

Tony hadn't been surprised when Peter had excused himself from dinner, leaving a barely touched plate behind. Sitting next to him, Tony could feel how tightly coiled his body was, even if he didn't have a clear angle on the kid's face.

After he'd helped clean up, FRIDAY had dutifully given up Peter's location. Tony was glad that he wouldn't have to suit up and try to find Peter on a high-rise ledge on such a blustery evening.

Tony could hear the sound of fists hitting pads as soon as he opened the gym door. It wasn't as well set out as the Compound facility, but it was still pretty impressive – full of plenty of top-notch gear.

Peter had his back to the door and his top had been discarded onto the floor. Tony could see the muscles in his back straining as he sent a fierce hook punch into the side of the bag, which would've had it swinging away if it wasn't being held in place by his other arm. Part of Tony wanted to protest him training so soon after having such serious injuries, but he knew, both internally and externally, he'd been fully healed for almost three weeks now. Tony sometimes wished he didn't have the super healing if it meant that it didn't give him downtime for his brain to process what had happened.

Peter hadn't stopped or turned when he came in, though it was likely he'd heard him. Regardless, he made a fairly noisy walk over to the refreshment area, taking out two bottles of water and a towel before heading over to the bag where he would be obviously in Peter's eye-line.

Peter didn't stop for a full minute more; pummeling the bag with a series of hits that ended with a

jumping roundhouse kick that sent the bag flying away, missing Tony easily but wafting air over him.

Tony wagged the bottle in Peter's direction and the kid barely nodded, his chest panting. Tony stepped closer as he threw the bottle of water to him, followed by the towel. Peter caught both, wiping the sweat off his face and torso, before opening the bottle and half draining it.

"Thanks," Peter said quietly. "I thought you'd find me sooner, and now I'm all sweaty."

"Well, someone disappeared so I got to do clean up duty solo."

The bag had settled into a soft swing and Peter stopped it with his palm. He set his stance again and slowly placed a fist to it, as if in practice.

"You think I'm a coward."

Tony coughed down the water that was in his mouth when Peter spoke.

"What?!" A cough burst out of him again. "Peter, you are about as far from being a coward as anyone I have ever met."

That information didn't seem to have any impact as the teen just stared at the punch bag.

"Yeah, but you wouldn't take the deal. You would want full justice...full retribution."

Revenge was the word Peter was skating around and he was right, he probably would. But then again, he had always been prone to vengeance. Moments of wanting to ruin the person who'd crossed him. To kill those that hurt him or the ones he loved. But Peter wasn't him. He *was* better.

"Maybe. And there would be no shame in that - in wanting him to pay. *If* that was what you wanted." Tony carried on as Peter still showed no emotion. "So long as your choice in this isn't about doing what you think is best for May, rather than what you want?"

Peter looked at him then; his eyes gleaming in the bright overhead lighting. “Can’t it be both?”

“Is it?”

“I-I think it is.”

“Well then, good. No conflict there then.” Tony wanted to wrap his arms around him then, but something about his stance told him not to. Tony took a step forward. “There’s something else…”

Peter looked at him and away into the corner. Tony swallowed – it was never a good sign if it was accompanied by that motion.

“I don’t want to leave.” Peter’s voice was so small he could barely hear it, but the words had impact.

Oh.

Tony and Pepper had offered for May and Alfie to stay at the Tower – a whole floor to themselves. May had been thankful but wanted the younger kids to have a ‘normal’ life. That had stung a bit when he thought that was something Morgan was being denied. But then again with a mother who is a CEO of a world leading tech company and your father a (semi) retired billionaire superhero (who saved the universe), normal was never going to be on the cards for her. Still, he could understand that pull in May after the nightmare of the five lost years and then the new nightmare of this year. Normality was nothing to be scoffed at.

Tony set his feelings aside and pulled Peter into his arms without a second thought.

“I don’t want you to leave either.” Peter made a small noise into his shoulder and hugged him tighter. Tony pulled away after a minute. “That probably was not helpful at making you feel better, but it’s the truth.”

Peter let out a huff as he wiped his eyes with his palms. “It’s not that I don’t want to live with May – I love her. It’s just…” He let out another shuddering breath. “I love it here with you all and I feel so safe and I don’t want to lose you guys.”

Tony's heart stuttered, not just at Peter's words but at the fact that he was saying them at all. Him opening up like this, saying what was bothering him, struck him as such a marked difference to how closed off the kid had been before. Whether it was the therapy, or the effect of no longer carrying those heavy secrets, it didn't really matter to Tony as to how it came about, this new level of trust between them. No more pussyfooting around their feelings for each other– that meant him too – so he followed suit:

“Ok, another truth bomb for you. You aren't going to lose us – ever. We'll still see each other tons. You can come here whenever you like. We love having you here and I want you to know that this will always be a home for you. We'll have lab days and pizza movie nights and lots of inappropriate talks about your crush on MJ.”

“I don't have a crush on MJ.”

“OK, we'll have lots of talks about how you lie to yourself too much.”

That elicited a smile out of him. Tony slipped an arm around his shoulders.

“You can't shake us off easily, Underoos. Besides, apparently, legally speaking, I'm meant to give Happy at least one day off a week, and you are like our only free babysitter...”

Peter laughed and Tony felt his stomach muscles relax a bit.

“Thanks Tony,” he replied, leaning into the hug.

Tony

“Right, so, I don't know where to begin with this, but I am hella hormonal so I'm just going to come out with it.”

Pepper and Tony shared a confused look before looking back at May. She had her feet up on the couch – her swollen ankles noticeable from here and her belly tight against her t-shirt. She looked exhausted.

“Peter really doesn’t want to move out, does he?”

“Oh May, he loves you. He wants to go with you.” Pepper burst out.

Tony stayed quiet and when he looked up, May was looking at him with a raised eyebrow.

“He said something to you.”

Tony didn’t want to break any confidences, but the time for not being straight with May had long since passed.

“He is...” Tony fanned his hands, “...conflicted.”

This didn’t seem to trouble May, but acted as a confirmation as she nodded her head.

“He hasn’t had much in the way of stability – not since before Ben really. Everything that followed was...well, yeah.” She cleared her throat. “I can see that, despite the circumstances, you’ve given him that here. Hell, even before everything that happened with...him...you were both active parts of his life. He loved his weekends with you and with Morgan. I’m not going to lie, I was a little jealous at the time. But I knew it was good for him and I was distracted with Alfie and the pregnancy and well...I didn’t try hard enough to...” A sob came.

“May...” Pepper’s voice soothed but May put a hand up in a stop motion before composing herself again.

“I can’t change what has happened in the past, but I can give him some stability now. Well, as much as teenage superhero can have, I guess.”

She seemed to gather herself up then.

“I can’t believe I am saying this, as I may be totally off base about how you guys feel, but...” May cleared her throat again. “How would you feel about – well, Tony specifically - becoming another legal guardian for Peter?”

Tony heard Pepper take in a sharp gasp of breath when he was simply holding his own. He turned to look at her – her look of shock quickly turning into her thinking face.

“May...I...” Tony stuttered, lost for words for once in his goddamn life. Being the kid’s formal guardian, showing how much he cared about him on paper, shouldn’t have mattered but as soon as he heard it as a possibility, he wanted it. Badly.

“I just thought it’s everything you have been doing for him already and it’d show him your commitment to him and my commitment to keeping his relationship to you. And you know he loves you – both – so, so much. I thought it being on paper might solidify it for him. God, maybe this was a silly idea...”

“No!” Pepper’s voice was loud and Tony felt a sharp stab in his left arm.

Pepper was saying no? Tony looked at her in confusion. But she loved Peter and she knew how much Tony did – she’d been the first to call him on it all those years ago, give or take a few jokes from Rhodey. It had been after a minor injury – a light stabbing - six months before Titan. Tony had stayed by his bedside overnight, tapping away on his tablet, coming up with new ideas on increasing protection on the suit. She had come down to the Medbay to force him to bed and he’d refused. He could remember her draped in the doorway, her arms lightly crossed. *You love him*, she’d said. He had paused for a second, knowing she was right, but scoffing and she’d come over and pressed a kiss to his forehead before leaving.

Tony looked over at Pepper now as she stared at the coffee table.

“No,” she repeated, adding another stab. Pepper lifted her head and looked between him and May. “Adoption. Tony should adopt him with you.”

He let out the breath and the rhythm returned to his heart as Pepper looked over at him, only a slight question in her wet eyes. He nodded slightly, his mouth just not working right now.

“You would...” May’s eyes were like saucers. “I never...”

“You and Ben never adopted him?” Pepper was back to business.

“We always meant to, but we were named legal guardians by Richard and Mary, so we never had to do that. Time passed and money was tight, so we just didn’t. He was already our son, you know?”

And Tony did – a piece of paper didn’t matter to him – Peter felt like his. But it might mean something to Peter.

“But can we even do that – legally – if we aren’t a couple?” May pointed a finger between her and Tony.

“I read an article about how platonic adoptions between friends are becoming more popular. Not usual but not unheard of in New York. And Peter is 16 – the judge would listen to him. And you know our lawyers are the best,” Pepper continued quickly, excitement rising in her voice.

“I think – I think he would really love that.” May’s voice was equally excited.

"But adoption would... that would mean Peter would get to inherit and Morgan, she..." May shook her head; a new uncertainty in her voice. "I... I guess you'll have a Will anyway, right? Make sure that all of Morgan's rights are secure. I mean, Peter, he'd never want to take anything that's hers... cause any tension like that or...or bad feeling..."

May was rambling now and Tony wanted nothing more than to tell her that he’d always hoped that Peter would end up running R&D at SI, that he’d already put a sizeable trust fund away for him, and that if Peter was going to be his – truly his – that he was damn well going to be given equal footing to Morgan. But his mouth and brain were just not connecting right now.

“May,” Pepper cut her off and Tony was grateful. She now arched her perfectly shaped eyebrow at the other woman. “I’m sure we can prepare Morgan to get by on just a few billion dollars...”

May’s eyes widened and she let out an uneasy laugh that caught in her throat.

There was a short break of silence and both women turned to look at him; seemingly aware that he'd been uncharacteristically quiet.

Tony felt Pepper's hand touch him; grounding him in a way he sorely needed right now.

"But Tony, we're jumping the gun. This is really down to you. No hard feelings if this isn't what you want. You've been a great father figure to him and that can still continue..."

May stopped her diatribe when Tony reached out and grabbed her hand, his gaze still directly focussed down.

As he raised his head, fat tears slid down his face, curving around the edges of his mouth as they turned up.

"I guess this time, it's a boy."

Peter

Something was off with the adults. At first Peter thought it was all of the organising of the upcoming move, though he wasn't certain, as in the end they had pushed it back a few weeks. May's reason had been that she didn't have the energy to rush so late in the pregnancy.

A few days ago, he'd got back from school early and the three of them been holed up in one of the conference rooms downstairs. He had tried to discretely walk past and listen in, but he couldn't hear anything which meant Tony must have turned on the soundproofing for the room.

It was starting to make him anxious.

"Hey May, is...is anything wrong?"

May looked up from her position on the couch, a paperback in her hand and Alfie curled up behind her knees staring at the TV.

“No, why?”

Peter scratched the back of his head. “It’s just you and Tony have been disappearing and…”

May’s genuinely warm smile made his stomach unfurl.

“We’ve just been working on some of the ongoing legal stuff. Nothing to worry about, sweetie.”

That had relieved Peter until about three days later when he was lying in bed texting goofy memes to Ned and MJ. Finals were over – thank God – another weight lifted from his shoulders. He had no idea if he’d done well, and for once, he didn’t much care. After everything he’d been through since he was reanimated, they seemed the least important thing in his life. Hopefully he’d done enough to carry on – he didn’t want to be split up from his friends.

Despite the fact the exams were over, he was still surrounded by textbooks. The teachers didn’t seem to care that school would be out for Summer at the end of next week. So here he was on a Friday night; half studying/half chatting. He wanted to get his work done before they moved into the new place on Sunday. He didn’t feel any more psyched about the move, but he’d advanced on to acceptance.

“Peter, Boss requests your presence in the living room.”

Peter frowned, he didn’t think Tony would be back from his meetings until later. He chucked his pencil down on the pad of paper and headed along the corridor to the living room.

He stopped at the entrance seeing Tony, Pepper and May stood up by the couches. Stood. Not sat lounging, or watching TV, or eating. Just stood.

Pepper noticed him first, her eyes crinkling into a smile. “Peter.”

Peter watched a nervous look pass between Tony and May. Oh shit. Something was wrong. Tony was many things, but nervous was a rarity.

May set him with a wide smile but her eyes were tight. “Peter, I’ve got a hot chocolate here with your name on it.”

Ok...this must be really bad news. The three of them together, stood, with hot chocolate for him.

He twisted his hands together as he took a half step in the room. “Did, um, something happen... with the sentencing?”

All three adults eased smiles onto their faces at his obvious anxiety.

“No, sweetheart. Just come and sit down, ok?” May sat herself on the sofa, patting the seat next to her.

Peter cautiously moved towards her, noticing how Tony avoided making eye contact with him. The sandwich from Delmar’s that he’d grabbed post-school started churning inside him.

Pepper and Tony both perched on the coffee table in front of him as he sat down next to May. She placed a hand on his arm, and he turned his gaze to her.

“So, as you know the new place is ready to go and I really hope that it will feel like a home to you...after everything,” May cleared her throat, “It got me thinking about family and love and connection. I have loved you since the day we first visited you in the hospital. Your Mom and Dad were so proud and Ben kept telling all the nurses that he was your Uncle – like that trumped Richard or something.” Her eyes gleamed as she spoke of the memory but it wasn’t with sadness, but with pure love. “I hadn’t been married to him for long and I felt on the outside a bit, not being related and all. But the Parkers were always so open and before long, I felt like I belonged. You’d come straight to me for a hug when I’d see you. We’d have you for sleepovers when your parents had to go away for work and have such great times.”

She swept her hair out of her face before continuing. “After they died, Ben and I, we were so worried that we wouldn’t be good enough for you...”

Peter frowned at her. “May...”

She put her hand up to stop him. “We were worried, but we tried and over time we created our own family, just the three of us. When we lost him...” She stopped then, her words catching in her throat and Peter squeezed her hand. “...I know I was a mess and you, gosh, you were so brave and you helped me even when unbeknownst to me you were off out helping a lot of other people too. I didn’t think my love for you could have grown any more, but it did. And Ben, he’d be so, so proud of you.”

Peter couldn’t keep the tears out of his eyes.

“Ok, this is not going how I planned out in my head.” She let out a wet laugh. “What I mean to say is that, when your parents passed, we became legal guardians for you, but you know we always felt like parents to you, regardless of what any legalities said. Do you understand?”

Peter nodded. “I feel the same way.”

May’s face broadened into a smile. “Good. But I want to make it official now. I want you to officially be Alfie and Splodge’s brother on paper. And I want you to be my son. I’d like to formally adopt you.”

“What?” Peter felt like someone had thrown a glass of water in his face. When he was younger, he had thought about it, what it would be like for Ben and May to be his parents. But he’d realised that not much would change – he always felt loved and supported and they acted parental anyway.

But there was no denying that it would be nice to be able to say that Alfie and Splodge were his brother and sister. No stumbling to explain to people their connection; to people who acted like that didn’t make them ‘real’ family. Not understanding that family is not just something you are born with – that you can build one too.

He put his arms around her in a hug and she squeezed back. They stayed there for a moment before May pulled back, her hand cupping his cheek.

“Is that a yes?”

Peter laughed – it was a total no-brainer - and gave her a nod; diving in for another hug. He loved hearing the reverberation of her laugh against his chest.

Pepper reached out a box of tissues from the table and they both took one; wiping their eyes, but not the smiles from their faces.

“There is something else.” Peter looked over at Tony, who was huddled close to Pepper: his leg bouncing up and down. His dark eyes were unusually intense as they settled on his.

“How would you feel about my adopting you as well?”

Peter stared at the man, his body going utterly rigid. Tony’s eyes averted to the side as he began to talk.

“I know our relationship had a rocky start, mostly because I was an emotionally constipated ass who was scared to let you close and hurt you, and even more afraid of how alike we were.” Tony cleared his throat before looking at him and Peter could see tears in his eyes. “I wasted time, but I don’t want to do that again. I’m sure you have your own feelings about this idea in regards to your Dad and Ben, and I would never try to replace them. I’m indebted to them for creating and bringing up such an amazing kid. I love you, Pete. Lord knows I’ve felt like it for a long time now, but I’d love to be your Dad - officially - if you’ll have me.”

No words came out of Peter’s mouth. He just stared at his mentor, the man he’d admired since he was a kid. The man that had guided him in what it means to be a hero, who had travelled to space with him, who had held him while he....

The way Tony had looked out for him recently when he had been at his lowest, even when he had pushed him away; been angry and down right rude. Tony hadn’t given up on him. Peter didn’t know if he could ever repay him for that. And he knew that Tony didn’t want him to even try. He did it out of love, right? He really did. All his actions were those of a Dad. In reality, he was already playing that role in his life.

The truth was that Peter had dreamed of Tony being his Dad long before today.

Peter must have paused for too long, because he saw the shadow of doubt cross over Tony’s eyes; his right hand rubbing his left wrist like he did when he was anxious.

“I realise that it’s a lot. And I don’t want you to feel obligated to say yes at all. Things will be just the same between us, whatever you decide. I can promise that.”

Peter launched himself into Tony, causing the man to let out a huff. He smelt motor oil, coffee and cologne and felt his heightened heartbeat against his own.

“Yes,’ he croaked into Tony’s ear, “of course, yes.”

Chapter End Notes

Another big shout out to MsHermia for her input and for literally some of the sentences in this chap!

So, thoughts on this little development?

Thanks for reading! Only one more chapter to go ☹

Chapter 40

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Epilogue

Tony

Tony had always loved a party. People coming together to have a good time, relax and enjoy each other's company. So, yes, he loved a party, and he was well known for throwing the best ones. So when Pepper had suggested putting together a shindig he had been all over it. Of course, in his hey day that meant loud music, endless booze and some non-specific white powder. Today however, given it was a 'Naming Day' party, it meant barbecue, bouncy castles and a petting Zoo. He'd just have to get his dopamine rush from the kid's screams of delight.

The party was, by his standards, modest in numbers; mostly the Avengers and a few of May's friends and work colleagues. The naming ceremony had been Pepper's idea. There hadn't been time for a baby shower with everything that had gone on before May gave birth. May hadn't been too sure of the idea but Pepper – master negotiator that she was - had easily convinced her that all she had to do was turn up with the two-month old and celebrate her life. That, and the combination of Peter's puppy dog eyes had been the one-two punch needed to get May's approval.

Laura and Pepper were hovering by the bouncy castle; with Alfie, Morgan and Nate going crazy inside. May was showing the little bundle of joy off to some friends, Happy hovering nearby. Happy was surprisingly good with babies—had been with Morgan— and May had been glad of his help. Tony suspected that there wasn't much Happy wouldn't do if May asked him. Nothing was going on there now, but who knows in the future, and for now it was fun to tease Happy about his crush.

The weather was glorious, early September still giving high temperatures. They'd planned to spend a fair amount of the summer here at the cabin but when the baby was born, they'd ended up mostly in the city, either at May's place in Queens or at the Tower, Peter wanting to be close by. Peter had unsurprisingly taken to being a big brother again in just the way he had with Morgan and Alfie; with great love and dedication.

Tony took a swig from his bottle of beer and looked for him now. It didn't take long for him to find his boy; he was talking animatedly in a group with Cooper, Lila, Ned and MJ smiling back at him. They were all laying out on the grass after a dip in the lake earlier. Peter looked up then;

catching him watching him and gave him a dazzling smile. He wouldn't get tired of being on the receiving end of that. Tony gave him a little wave and Peter turned his attention back to his friends.

"Helicopter parent much?"

Tony twisted to see Clint coming up behind him.

"I'm merely observing the party, birdbrain."

"Uh huh," Clint cracked a smile and came and sat next to him on the picnic bench, so they were both looking out at the group. "It's been a good day."

"Yeah, it has," Tony breathed, feeling calm as the tinkling of laughter and the warm end of summer air washed over him.

"Peter looks happy," Clint commented, reaching into the cooler and pulling out a beer of his own.

"Yeah," Tony agreed. He really did. It was so nice to see the kid starting to get back some of his joyful, carefree side.

"He going back out as Spider-man yet?"

"Yep, for the last few weeks."

Clint sat back. "Good for him."

Tony hadn't been surprised when Peter had told him that he was ready. He'd been training a few times a week with Bucky, he'd talked it through with Jan, as well as with him and May. It had been time.

In typical Peter fashion, he had gone back to it like he'd never been away. The newspapers even commenting that Spider-man had obviously been rejuvenated by his 'summer break'.

Spider-man going out again had caused more than a little anxiety for him; Peter getting hurt suddenly seeming even more unbearable after everything. Luckily for him, Peter hadn't noticed Bucky tailing him the first few patrols. But he wasn't going to tell Clint about that. I mean, helicopter parenting really did get a bad rap. What was wrong with caring about your kid and wanting to know where they were at all times, huh?

"How is he, really?" Clint's voice was low.

Tony looked at him then; Clint's blue eyes serious.

"Yeah, he's doing much better. Been some moments, but you know how it goes." Tony didn't like to think of the nightmares that still came and how they made the kid jumpy and distant for hours afterwards. It was hard to see, but it was improving.

Clint hummed. He knew more than most that going through what Peter had would always stay with him, in some capacity.

"I still think that prick should have gotten longer." Clint took a drag of beer, his eyes darkening now.

Tony couldn't disagree with that. The sentencing had been earlier in the summer. May had just had the baby and didn't want to go; he didn't blame her. Peter originally didn't want to either but had suddenly announced he did an hour beforehand. Kevin had stood up and pled guilty and the judge sentenced him to seven years. Tony knew those things happened—the words had filtered through to his ears—but his attention had been solely on Peter. Peter, who'd sat dead still throughout, staring at the back of Kevin's head; his body so tense and his grip so tight on the handles of the chair, that Tony was worried that he might break them. As they led Kevin out, he'd suddenly stood up and held his hand out to Tony and said; *'Let's go home.'*

Tony had wondered what it would've been like if he'd been in Peter's position and it had been the great Howard Stark up in court. How would he have felt to hear his Dad admit, just once, to the things he had done; to the way he had treated him when he was too young to defend himself. The idea that anyone would have believed him; that anyone would have stopped him even if they knew, had never felt like a possibility. Would it have made a difference, or was the damage already done? He looked back over at Peter; he hoped that it would help, in some small way. If he couldn't have had that, he was glad that his kid could.

Tony leant back on the bench, glancing at Clint. “It was how Pete wanted it.”

Clint tilted his head and let out a small sigh. “He’s too nice.”

“Well, if that’s the worse thing people can say about him...” Tony trailed off, but once again, Clint wasn’t wrong.

FRIDAY trilled in his ear. “Boss, the petting Zoo will be packing up soon.”

“Oh yes,” Tony rapped his knuckles on Clint’s chest. “Come on, you might want to see this.”

“Pete!” Tony called out, pointing at his watch.

Peter knew what he meant exactly. He watched as Peter dashed over to where Sam and Rhodey were holding court with some of May’s nurse friends. Bucky was stood next to them, his arms behind his back, not looking all that comfortable with the lady who kept touching his bicep. So much so that he looked relieved when Peter spoke to him and started pulling him away. They all arrived at the area where they’d laid out the petting Zoo at the same time.

“Lucky escape there, Buckaroo?” Tony smirked at him as Peter disappeared over to the people handling the animals.

“They are nice enough. Just...handsy...” Bucky trailed off, a faint smile on his lips.

“Tone, did it sound like he was almost complaining about that to long time married men like us?!” Clint shook his head in disbelief.

They were interrupted then by bleating and they moved to see Peter leading three goats out on ropes with a big grin on his face.

Tony turned to Bucky. “So, these beauts, are for you.”

“What?!” The other man’s eyes widened.

“If you want them, of course. The guys here will set up a hut for you on the Compound grounds. There is plenty of space for them to graze etc. He’ll even come and look after them when you are away blah blah.”

Bucky just stared at the goats and back up at Tony. “I don’t understand.”

“It was the kid’s idea, I just...” Tony twirled a finger in the air. “...facilitated.”

“I just wanted to say, um, thanks for helping me with, you know, training and...everything.” Peter’s cheeks started to flush a little. “And I wanted to get you something, but I don’t know what you like, but then I remembered how much you loved the goats when you showed them to me in Wakanda. But I couldn’t get any from there, so sorry they aren’t the same type...apparently they don’t travel well, and I wouldn’t want to traumatise...”

Peter was cut off from his nervous rambling by Bucky’s arm on his shoulder.

“Kid,” Bucky’s voice was gravelly, “I love them, thank you.”

It seemed that was all it took for Peter to see that as an invitation to hug, and Bucky suddenly had an armful of Spiderling. Tony laughed at the surprised expression on Bucky’s face. It didn’t last long before his lips curved into a wide smile and he wrapped both arms around the kid in return.

Peter pulled away, cheeks still red, and Tony could’ve sworn that he saw some shine in the former assassin’s eyes.

“Here you go,” Peter handed over the ropes to Bucky, who bent down and started to pet them like they were puppies, with Peter following suit.

“What’s going on over here people?” Sam’s happy tone rode over the airways to them.

Sam came up to the group and wiggled his eyebrows quizzically at Bucky and Peter’s treatment of the goats.

Clint stepped forward, a wicked grin on his face, and clapped Sam on the shoulder. “Some new housemates for you.”

Sam looked back down between Bucky and the goats.

“Oh *hell* no!”

Peter

“Oh my God, this is so gross.” Alfie’s nose wrinkled up at the sight of the marks on Peter’s shirt. His legs banged against the cabinets as he sat next to Peter who was hovering over the sink.

Peter stopped wiping the residue off his shirt. “How can you not be used to this by now?”

“When will she stop?” Alfie’s voice came out as a whine, and Peter rolled his eyes.

“She didn’t even puke on *you*.”

“Boys – cake time!” Pepper’s voice called from the open door.

Alfie jumped down from the counter as fast as he had ever moved, and Peter finished drying his shoulder before following him out.

The lake outside was calm today but the sun still bounced off it, glistening as always. He loved it here; it was the perfect place for the party.

May was holding the small bundle, her loose curls poking out from under her ridiculous bow as she approached him.

“Would you mind holding her, I’m going to say a few words.”

Peter happily scooped her up, loving the warm feel of her in his hands. “Come on, Splodge.”

The baby barely stirred in his arms, but he made sure his stickiness was working as a double precaution.

May went and stood by the cake that Tony had insisted on – a huge photo of the baby’s face with *Nova Virginia* written at the bottom – and picked up a glass and tapped a knife to it gently. People gathered into a loose circle; voices lulling to a hum.

“I’m not used to public speaking, so I will keep it short. I just want to say a huge thank you for everyone coming out to celebrate the birth of Nova. We’ve been very lucky that she has, so far, been a very easy-going baby but I’m sure it will come back to bite me when she is a toddler. Thank you to my two sons, Peter and Alfie who have taken on the roles of big brother with immense seriousness and endless love.” May looked over at Peter and gave him a smile. She took a breath before looking back to the group.

“All of you know that the past year has been one of the hardest of my life. I’m not sure how I would have coped without the support of everyone here, especially that of Tony and Pepper. I will forever be indebted to them. They have gone above and beyond as friends, and will now always be considered my family. So, I’ll end with a toast; to family, wherever you may find it.”

There were some mismatched cheers of ‘family’ and clinking of glass on glass.

Peter looked around at the crowd of people — so many of them he now considered part of his family. He felt so lucky. This year had been shit. No two ways about it. Kevin was gone, but the ghost of him still lived on; in his nightmares, sometimes when he heard a particular phrase and then, boom, he was back there; scared and alone. But those times were getting less frequent, less impactful and that was in no small part to all the people around him here.

May’s cheeks were flushed pink as she made it back to Peter’s side.

“You did great,” he whispered in her ear.

“Before you all disperse, I want to say something.” Tony’s voice carried across the space.

There were some light-hearted ‘Boo’s’ from Rhodey and Sam.

“You can take the boys out of the army...” Tony called back at them earning some more whooping.

Tony chuckled.

“Thank you everyone for coming to our little party today. I think we can all agree that Nova is a welcome addition and certainly helping ease my wife’s broodiness by being sure to puke on her at least once a day.”

Tony paused for the small ripple of laughter.

“If a year ago today, you would’ve told me that nearly all of us would be back together, I wouldn’t have believed you. But here we are. Also, if you had told me that I would have a teenager living with me half the time and yet still managing to eat all of my food, then I wouldn’t have believed that either.” Tony looked around until his eyes fell on Peter.

“Peter, get over here.” Peter’s eyes widened. “Come on kid, don’t leave me hanging.”

May gave him a knowing look as she took Nova from him and Peter walked over to Tony with his hands in his pockets. Tony clasped his neck; his calloused hand sending a spike of warmth down his spine.

“Since this is technically a ‘Naming Day’, I couldn’t think of a better way to formally introduce you all to my son, Peter Parker-Stark.”

Peter had thought a lot about whether to change his name. He felt like he had talked about the adoption and his name a million times with Jan the therapist, as well as with May. He didn’t want to seem like he was forgetting his Dad and Ben by leaving Parker behind. There had been no pressure from Tony – he said he’d be happy either way and Peter could see he was telling him the truth. That was when he had decided to simply have them both. Peter Parker-Stark. This name felt like it fitted – the combination of his past, present and future.

Peter wasn't sure he could get much more embarrassed at this point- being the focal point of attention was not something he ever liked. But then Happy came over with a cake which had his new name on - and a photo of him.

"You didn't." Peter felt his cheeks heat. It was a photo of him asleep, drool visible in the corner of his mouth, completely covered in silly string courtesy of his adorable siblings. Peter knew he shouldn't have pranked Tony last week by jumping down from the ceiling when he had been carrying a bowl of popcorn.

Tony gave him a shit eating grin before turning back to the group and raising his glass. "My son everyone!"

There was another cheer from the group as Tony enveloped him in a hug. Peter hugged him back, not caring now that everyone was watching. Tony pressed a kiss to his temple before releasing him.

Peter watched as Tony turned to talk to Pepper. He let the smile on his face broaden.

"Hey Dad," he called softly. He had been trying it out – *Dad* – it had been so long since he had used it, that it sounded foreign on his tongue. He found that it didn't jar him the first time he had used it- maybe because he was so young when his Dad died that he didn't remember saying it. Or maybe it was because it just fitted how he felt for Tony. It didn't help that Tony gave him this goofy, happy grin every time that he did. Just like he did then as he turned around.

"Yes, son." His eyes were crinkled with love and happiness and it made a small lump rise in Peter's throat.

"Want some cake?"

Peter whipped a hand through the thick frosting and flung it at Tony, hitting him square on the cheek.

Peter froze for a second – shit, had he gone too far? – before a frankly evil look took over Tony. Before Tony could get his hand in the cake, Peter took off, dodging past people.

Tony was hot on his heels.

“Stop him!” Tony yelled and Peter looked up to see Sam and Clint who dodged in front of him, causing him to stop his trajectory.

“Guys!” Peter yelped as Bucky and Rhodey came on the other side, effectively corralling him in.

“Traitors. I’m so not taking it easy on you at the next training session.”

He heard them laugh before Tony barrelled into him, knocking them both to the floor. Tony was on top of him, a large handful of bright, blue frosting still in his hand. Peter caught his hand just before Tony was about to force it into his face – his own face full of determined amusement. That look changed as Peter began to use his strength to push his arm back up towards Tony’s own face.

“Peter,” his voice warned, “don’t do anything you might regret now.”

“I’m not sure you regret embarrassing me with that photo quite enough.” Peter pushed Tony’s cake filled fist closer to his face again – sending him a big grin as he did.

“Shove that in my face and I’m taking away your inheritance.”

Peter laughed. “My inheritance – ha, wait, what?! What inheritance?!”

His grip loosened in surprise and Tony’s wicked grin was the last thing he saw before cool mush covered his cheek and mouth. Huh, who’d have thought that they made blueberry flavoured icing?

THE END

And that is a wrap folks! Eek!

Would love to hear your comments on how you found the ending and now you've read it all, thoughts on the whole thing.

Thanks again to MsHermia for her input on this and the last few chapters.

Without the risk of sounding like an Oscar acceptance speech, I really want to thank everyone who has been reading - its been amazing to see the hits going up. It is more than I ever expected, and in such a short space of time. It's been insane!

To those that have taken the time to comment, you have really made my life better. I have LOVED responding to people and hearing all their thoughts, predictions and feelings on what has happened. It's so fun to explore and explain the world and characterisation I've used.

You have all been so supportive and welcoming to a newbie fan fic writer and I can't tell you how much this has buoyed up my confidence, both in myself and in my writing.

Thank you 😊♥

(And if you liked it, spread the word, recommend on Tumblr, all that good stuff 😊)

Chapter 41

Hey everyone, as promised, in celebration of reaching 100K hits, I've added a one-shot set in this same series.

You can find it here: [Mirror, signal, manoeuvre](#)

End Notes

Thank you for reading. Comments welcomed -help a newbie out :-)

I set up a Tumblr but I'll be honest I'm clueless about it so hit me up there and teach me your ways. Seriously, please do, I have no idea what to do!

<https://www.tumblr.com/blog/spagbol99>

I also have a Wattpad for my original works - check it out if you like stuff in a similar vein. Think family drama, tragedy and some angst. <https://www.wattpad.com/user/Spagbol99>

As I mentioned, I am new to the fandom so I don't have a beta. If anyone fancies it, let me know.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!